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THE
ONE GOOD GUEST

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ONE GOOD GUEST

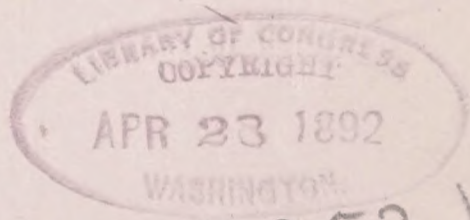
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THE ONE GOOD GUEST.

“Tell me, ye sons of Phœbus, what is this
Which all admire, but few, too few, possess ?
A virtue 'tis to ancient maids unknown,
And prudes who spy all faults except their own.
Say, Wyndham, if 'tis possible to tell
What is the thing in which you most excel ?
Hard is the question, for in all you please,
Yet your *good nature* is your noblest praise.”

LYTTLETON.

CHAPTER I.

“IDA AND I ARE OLD ENOUGH NOW FOR ANY-
THING.”

It was a very important affair, the assembling of that shooting party at Duckhill Manor.

Nothing of the kind had been attempted since the demise of the old squire a dozen years before ; and it was only after much discussion, and many timid pros and cons, that invitations had been issued in the present instance.

What if people would not come? What if they thought it "cheek" their being asked? What if the shooting did not please them? What if they did not please each other?

These were the questions which four youthful serious countenances put to one another at intervals, and for which no one of the four could ever find a satisfactory reply.

Hosts and hostesses to the manner born—or even to the manner bred—may smile, nay, laugh outright, at such simplicity; but when they learn that the young folks to whom the matter was, after a fashion, one of life and death, were none of them much over twenty years of age, that they were ambitious, high-spirited, and independent—while at the same time forced to confront their ignorance of the world and its ways at every turn—it will be felt that after all, their anxiety and apprehensions were not altogether ill-founded.

Here they were, without father, or mother, or elderly relations—without guardian or superior, without any experience to fall back upon, any wiseacre to umpire among conflicting opinions, or to close with authority debatable

conjectures—here they were, a happy, healthy, leaderless crew, rejoicing in their freedom, and confident of their luck.

Tom, the eldest, had done with Cambridge, and Ida, next of age, with Paris and Brussels. The younger girls, respectively fourteen and eleven, had been set free by the death of an aunt; and, as has been said, it was the opinion of one and all that thenceforth they could manage themselves, and live very happily together at the old home, without the necessity for either supervision or authority.

Jenny's and Louie's lessons were arranged for at the vicarage—even that difficulty was disposed of.

“Of course Ida and I are old enough now for anything,” said Tom.

It must not be supposed, however, that because our young people resolved to be a law unto themselves, and beholden to nobody for advice or counsel, that they had any idea of running riot at Duckhill.

So far was this from being the case, that it would have been difficult to find a more seriously disposed quartet.

Life, as they took it, was surcharged with importance and responsibility. The very fact that they had been early left orphans, and had been permitted by easy-going guardians to direct their own affairs, had weighed them down, and set the stamp of dignity upon their most trifling actions.

They had been wont, even as children, to hold momentous conversations with one another anent their movements, or requirements. If any change had to be effected in the life of one or other, the whole four would write, talk, telegraph, travel, as though the world depended on it.

Behind backs their elders, it must be confessed, were hugely diverted by this innocent pomposity on the part of poor Tom Barnet's family. Tom, they told each other, had been as scatter-brained a fellow as you could meet with, and his wife had not been noted either for sense or attainments. Whence, then, came these precocious children, who needed neither guiding hand nor restraining arm, and whose harrowing anxiety to do the right thing under every conceivable circumstance was an

actual rebuke to people who took life more easily?

To be sure it was a wonderful comfort to all concerned to have such young people in the family.

“A fine young fellow, my ward, Tom Barnett,” old General Thistleblow would pronounce at his club. “’Pon my word, he’s a credit to one. Gives no trouble. Can steer his own helm; and is as unlikely to make ducks and drakes of his property as any youngster I know.” But aside the speaker would occasionally wink the eye, and sidle round to a confidential ear. “A thundering prig, you know. No more like his father—bless my soul! what a laugh poor Tom had! And what glorious times we used to have at that old place! I’d give something to see Duckhill once more what it was then. I don’t take to these monstrous proper-behaved young men; no, I don’t; and that’s what this boy of good old Tom’s is turning out”—slowly—“a starched-up, lantern-jawed, solemn young ass, whose very boot heels squeak propriety.”

There were, however, those who thought no

worse of the young man because he was held thus cheap by a not over reputable man of the world. It was suspected that the ward had got the upper hand of the guardian, and the ward rose in public estimation by having done so. Propriety such as Thistleblow scoffed at, sits gracefully on the owner of six thousand a year.

At twenty-one of age, Tom Barnet—the new Tom Barnet—had entered upon his patrimony, and the usual festivities had taken place. Everything had been done in rigorous conformation to established rule and precedent; nothing had been overlooked; and no one had been neglected.

But Tom himself had had little to do with the arrangements. It had seemed to him that until he had duly taken possession of his kingdom, and assumed the administration of his affairs, it was not his place to direct and authorise. Accordingly, in an elaborate epistle, which was stored up as a treasure thenceforth, all details of the important event were handed over to the care of the steward and the farm bailiff, in whose hands the young squire unreservedly placed himself.

If, however, these worthies entertained any idea of taking such humility as the key-note of the future of Duckhill, time speedily dispelled the idea. The same sense of the fitness of things which had made the new proprietor passively grateful and neutral as the recipient of universal goodwill, directly the occasion was over, stirred him up to be actively at work poking his brisk young nose into every hole and corner.

It seemed to him that he was a great man, and that the estate of Duckhill was a great estate. The thought was solemnising. He had absolutely no consciousness of being flattered and uplifted by a sense of his own importance; he had no idea that the weight of his responsibilities made him tread on air.

As for his sisters—but the sisters deserve their own word in passing.

Naturally and properly Tom was all the world to them, and his opinions, decisions, tastes, likings and dislikings, a matter of first-rate consequence.

Yet, although overshadowed, the girls were not annihilated by their big brother. Ida, in

particular, held that she also had a sphere—a minor sphere—but a sphere all the same.

She was Miss Barnet. It was a grievous offence if an envelope were by any chance addressed “Miss Ida Barnet.”

True, there were maiden aunts, and the aunts were also Miss Barnets, but as would be anxiously explained to Jenny and Louie, the good ladies were not Miss Barnets of Duckhill Manor; they had been once, but they were not now the daughters of the house; the elder of the two was not, as Ida was, its reigning mistress.

A sense of the dignity accruing to her from this blest position had swelled the breast of the speaker as she summed up the case, and arrived at the all-important decision a few months before our story opens. Jenny and Louie, as in duty bound, had nodded assent, and all three had drawn a breath in unison, and paused to consider the ground whereon they trod.

Ida's brain was active, Jenny's and Louie's were acquiescent. The three were excellent friends and co-workers in the scheme for making Duckhill Manor all that it ought to be, a house

with a position, a centre of attraction for neighbours, a rallying point for relations.

"I think we can do it," pronounced Tom, the four being in council. "But it will be no easy thing to do. We shall have to be *awfully* careful. We shall have to think everything *well* over. We must not give people a handle to say *anything*."

"Of course not," assented Ida, shaking her pretty head. Ida was a pretty girl, and had in particular a prettily shaped head which she was in the habit of shaking when it behooved her to be especially wise.

"If we are to live all alone here, we must make up our minds to be just twenty times as precise and particular as if we had a board of guardians over us. If we had that, we might be a great deal more free."

"Oh, don't let us have that—oh, Ida, you said——", Jenny, the next sister, had missed the point of the argument; "oh, Ida," she now began to wail, "you are not wanting to persuade us we should be better off with guardians?"

"Nonsense, child; who said we should be better off?" rejoined the other, impatiently.

“I merely said we should be more free—and who wants to be more free? Tom and I don’t; and as for you and Louie it would be very bad for you and Louie, very bad indeed”—with a frown of a denouncing prophetess. “You must remember that, girls. If you are to be allowed to go on without a governess, only doing your lessons at the vicarage, and coming home every day to luncheon, and so on, you must not think you are to run wild the rest of the time——”

“We shall have our lessons to prepare.”

“But even when your lessons *are* prepared,”—the elder sister was resolute that there should be a complete understanding on the subject—“you must still recollect that you are only *schoolroom girls*. Schoolroom girls, and not expected to appear in the drawing-room when visitors come, and not——”

“Aren’t we to have tea with you and Tom?”

Ida looked at her brother, who in his turn looked back at her. Two pairs of round eyes regarded them both.

“The little girls did come in at five o’clock at Stoneham,” murmured Tom, suggestively.

A vision of himself and Ida alone in the great cheery hall where tea was wont to be served, and of two poor banished little faces sitting drearily down to a miserable little meal in a far-off wing, rose before his eyes. "I—what do you think, Ida?"

Ida was hesitating also.

"Of course I should like to have them," she began.

"Oh, *do* have us; please *do* have us."

"But you would not even wish us to have you, if it were not the right thing to do," continued the elder sister, quelling with a glance the outburst. "We are merely considering—Tom and I—whether or not we ought, for your sakes, to have you. Don't suppose it is a question of liking."

"Mary and Charlotte always have tea with their mamma."

"Are you sure? How do you know?"

"Oh, they said so; they have told us often; they go in directly after lessons; and the governess has her tea by herself on a tray in the schoolroom. She prefers it, and Lady De Rigueur thinks it a good thing for Mary and

Charlotte to have a change, and to see the people who come."

"You are quite sure they are allowed in when people come?" demanded Tom in searching accents.

"Quite—quite sure. Mary told us, and so did Charlotte. Didn't they, Louie? Didn't they both? And they said they looked forward to it all day, for it was such fun, especially in the shooting season. And they hurry on with their lessons when it gets near five o'clock,"——

"If Lady De Rigueur allows it, I suppose it must be all right?" said Tom, to Ida.

"Certainly — yes — I should — think so; I should think we might. Well, I am very glad," assented the second in command quite kindly and pleasantly. "I *had* thought of it, but really I did not feel sure; and you know, girls, we are not to be different in any way from other people; however, now we know that it is *done*," and both Ida and Tom looked cheerful and relieved, while the young ones almost danced with joy.

This may serve as a specimen of the consul-

tations which went on continually at the manor while the new life had yet to be adjusted.

But at the time our little story opens, such consultations had, for the most part, borne fruit, and the youthful party had settled down, fenced in by hedgerows of bristling rules and regulations, having taken every step onward with the utmost deliberation and precision, to the edification of all about them, and sometimes, it must be owned, not a little to the secret amusement of a world unaccustomed to such reverence from such young disciples.

And now we come to the shooting party, the great yearly function which every ancient tradition and association demanded of Duckhill Manor.

CHAPTER II.

“THE WHOLE THING WAS A DEAD FAILURE.”

THE very day after the party assembled, down came the rain.

Scarcely had the last portmanteau been carted up from the station, and the last guest been shown to his room, ere the south-west wind, which had been sending forth sundry puffs and swirls throughout the day, settled down into a steady assault of turret and casement, against which every creaking doorway sent forth its protest. Heavy showers dashed against the window-panes between whiles.

Next morning it became evident that no shooting could take place for twenty-four hours, at any rate.

Still, Duckhill Manor could stand a siege of the elements for twenty-four hours. There was a picture gallery, a library, and a billiard-room. The ladies who had been lured down

to a remote, and to them uninteresting part of the country, by husbands intent on sport, with fair promises of good quarters, did not at the first blush feel that they had much to complain of—the husbands themselves took stock of each other and were tolerably quiescent.

But the next day, and the next, and the next, brought no happy change.

Then it became evident to the unfortunate young host and hostesses that there was only one guest among the many present to whom they could turn for sympathy, from whom they had any hope of philosophy. General Thistleblow was blowing off his indignation in snorts suggestive of a railway engine. Colonel Jessop was spiteful and malignant. The younger men, with one exception, gloomy and taciturn. Maurice Stafford alone was absolutely untainted by the prevailing discontent. He not only said nothing—he looked nothing unpleasant. He came down to breakfast morning after morning cheerful, hopeful, serene—yet unobtrusive. He did not torment others by his optimism.

There is a certain aggressive jollity of de-

meanour which, especially when it develops into facetiousness, is more intolerable to ill-used mankind and womankind, than would be the worst fit of the sulks. One feels that it is forced and unnatural—consequently impertinent.

But the philosophy of Maurice Stafford put nobody in the wrong; he listened to covert growls from every side; assented to the “Confounded nuisance!” of the sportsman, and the “Terrible disappointment!” of the sportsman’s wife; he accompanied scouts to this outlook and that; shook his head as knowingly as they did; shrugged his shoulders; raised his eyebrows; lurched off to the billiard-room when others so lurched; went the round of the windows again before luncheon; owned that the chances of out-door improvement grew less with every hour; and finally entered the dining-room, and ate his luncheon as unconcernedly as though fortune had smiled upon every aspiration of his breast.

Such a man was indeed a godsend at such a moment. Hostesses do not in their hearts like black looks, and muttered imprecations directed at their own skies and winds. They may

affect to sympathise; may declare that the weather is really "too bad"; that the whole thing is "shockingly unfortunate,"—"cruel,"—"most annoying and tiresome"; but if you will believe me, dear young gentleman with the thundercloud on your brow, they don't like that thundercloud. A hundred to one they are internally calling you names—not flattering names; they are anathematising your want of manners and ill-humour, as heartily as you in your coarser phraseology are swearing at the rudeness of the elements.

Believe this, and you will comprehend why it was that Maurice Stafford was asked to stay on at Duckhill Manor, when at length, the shooting having had to be finally abandoned by dint of the rain turning to sleet, and the sleet to snow, the unfortunates who had been thus mocked by fortune fairly turned tail, and made off to happier, or at all events, drier hunting grounds.

Maurice alone—(they all called him "Maurice" among themselves; he had "a kind of Mauricey face," the little girl said)—Maurice alone, was asked to stay on.

“We must let this lot go, or they would never forgive us,” Tom Barnet sought out his sister for private consultation. “They are disgusted, as it is, but they would hate us a long way more if we made them stay on. For it means business, this frost does. We are in for it; and it’s beastly having to go on and on making excuses, and telling lies about the barometer. It is *not* going to thaw, and that’s all about it. Jenkins says it will ‘freeze like old boots’ again to-night; and it will freeze to-morrow, and the next day, and the next. We are regularly in for it, Jenkins says. A nice mess we have made of this party. I am glad they are going, eh, Ida?” lowering his tone. “Deuced glad, aren’t you? A peevish lot! As if *we* could help the weather! But I say, we’ll keep Maurice, sha’n’t we? I suppose it would be all right to keep Maurice, would it not? A nice chap, and so quiet, and so *awfully* well behaved. There could be no harm in keeping Maurice on for a bit, could there?”

Ida looked thoughtful.

“The only thing is——” she began.

“Well?” demanded her brother.

“It might look a little strange.”

“Strange? How strange? Of course if it had been another sort of fellow, but Maurice is so uncommonly quiet, and so—so cheerful, and—harmless.”

“Yes—yes.”

“I do want a fellow like that sometimes,” pleaded poor Tom. “Of course I’m not saying its lonely—and we made up our minds to it even if it were—but still, when you get a good fellow like Maurice Stafford—and such an in-offensive chap, too——”

“Oh, I think you might really keep him,” said Ida. “Yes, I am sure you might,” with decision. “As you say, he is perfectly inoffensive, and you know we are going to have some more people almost immediately, so that we shall not be alone.”

“That’s it. We shall not be alone. I can say we are expecting another lot—and that as he *is* here, he can stay on here. I’ll put it to him.”

Maurice could scarcely help laughing at the way it was put to him.

“All the same, I think I am expected to go,” said he, however.

“Expected? By whom? By me—or my sisters?”

“By everyone, I meant,” said Maurice; “by the field generally. Thistleblow has invited me to dine at his club, the Vernons have asked for my direction, and the Clarkes have inquired about my train. I am to travel with the Clarkes. Lady Sophia has even taken the trouble to inform me at what hour I shall arrive at St. Pancras.”

“Like her cheek! What the dickens is it to her when you arrive anywhere?” cried the young host, hot at this infringement of his rights. It was his place to inform guests departing upon such subjects, did the guests require information. “I never heard of such impudence! The fact is, you know,” persuasively, “that we *want* you to stop on—we do indeed. This shooting party has been a dead failure, and the sooner it comes to an end the better. But don’t you be badgered into going away, just because Lady Sophia means you to go. This is not Lady Sophia’s house; you are

our guest, not hers ; and I should hope my sisters and I are competent to—we surely have some right to a say in the matter.”

“It is really most awfully kind of you,” said Maurice, musingly. “Of course you must know that I should like to stay”—and of course it ended in his staying.

“But, upon my word, I thought those Clarkes would have had him along with them to the very last moment,” confided Tom to his sisters presently. “What they wanted with *our* Maurice, goodness knows, for he is not everybody’s bargain, and not the Clarkes’ sort at all. Directly they are back in town Lady Sophia will drop him like a hot potato. He is too good a sort for her. He’s not the least the sort I’ve met at her house. She simply wanted him because he is *our* man ; I don’t believe she had a single other reason.”

“How did he escape ? What did he say ? ”

“Oh, I don’t know. I don’t remember. Now that I think of it, I can’t recollect that he said anything. He just looked her in the face and smiled. You know Maurice’s foolish smile ? It did for her ladyship better than

any words could have done. I expect she felt herself snubbed ; and I am jolly well glad she did. She only wanted him to go because she did not want him to stay ; and she only did not want him to stay because she wanted to break up the party, and then go away and slang us."

"That was it," assented Ida, "that was it, Tom, exactly. I know we made a few mistakes, but it was not her place to ferret them out. And you have no idea how rude she was. She always waited till I was alone to be her rudest. And Colonel Jessop was no better. Horrid little wretch ! He even began abusing the dinner ! And he said the billiard balls weren't round, Tom. Did you ever hear anything more ridiculous, more absurd ? How can billiard balls be anything but round ? "

"They are a little gone," owned Tom, somewhat crestfallen. "They want paring, and I ought to have had it done, but I forgot. What a little beast to go and find it out ! I hope he didn't go sneaking to the other men. Did any of them hear him ? Maurice, anyway, would never have found it out for himself."

“Or, if he had, he would never have said so.”

“I wish Jessop had not noticed that,” muttered poor Tom with increasing discomfiture. “It was stupid of us to forget those balls. Stupid of me, I mean, for of course you girls could not be expected to know. But I did know—only I never once thought of it; I was so taken up with other things. Jessop ought to have been kept out of the billiard-room. He is nothing of a player, and I believe would never have set foot in it but for this beastly weather. By Jove! look at the rain now! It is raining and snowing at once! I never saw anything like it! To take this week of all weeks in the year to come down like this!” walking gloomily to the window. “The whole thing has been a dead failure”—(how sick his auditor had grown of the phrase!)—“as dead a failure as a thing could be; and they took care we should know as much. I suppose they will go away now, and say we ought never to have had the cheek to attempt it. I think I hear them—I know exactly what they will call us. Lady Sophia——”

“Lady Sophia! Pooh! Lady Sophia be—I wish I were a man to say it! Lady Sophia indeed!” Ida, with a bright patch on either cheek, was tossing about chin and curls, and every unpleasant memory in one burst of glorious disdain. “What need we care for Lady Sophia? We are as good as Lady Sophia any day,” cried she. “I don’t mean to be *downed* by Lady Sophia, or Lady Anybody, I can tell you, Tom. Let me catch Lady Sophia telling tales—why, dear me! other people as well as we have had shooting parties spoilt by bad weather! Why should we take it to heart more than they? Why should it matter more for us than for them?”

“Because it was our first,” said Tom, sadly. “And because we are not supposed to know about parties, and things. It would have been such a score for us if our first had gone off well. I’m sure none of them expected it would—and now, you see, they were right. If we had scored a big success!”

“Well, we didn’t score a big success, and that’s all about it. Don’t let us bother our heads any more.”

"Why, I thought you cared as much as I. I thought we all did," his plaintive accents heralding the approach of a grievance.

"I cared—of course I cared. And if we had been to blame—if we had got the wrong people—or if the shooting had been bad—I should have been as much ashamed as any one; but I don't see," quoth Ida, resolutely, "why you should go on about 'a dead failure' with such a melancholy face, when it was only the weather which spoilt the whole. The *weather*! What is the weather? What had we to do with the weather?"

"Why, that is what I said to Maurice."

"To Maurice? Surely *he* was not abusing us."

"Never said a nasty word."

"No," said Ida, still more energetically than before. "That he has not—at least I know he has not to me. That is why I like this Maurice. He has been so—so kind about it all. I am sure he is sorry for us and understands how we feel. I know I was often thankful to see him come into the room: I felt as if we had one friend at least."

"By Jove! So did I. That was exactly how I felt. If Maurice had only been a little older—if he had been a man of sixty, he could have stood up for us to that supercilious old Thistleblow, and bossed our side against him and Jessop—but anyhow he did his best."

"And I do think we ought to feel grateful to him."

"Well, we do feel grateful. We should not have asked him to stay on if we hadn't. He was our one good guest."

"You are sure he likes to stay, Tom?"

"He was pleased to be asked, anyway. And—oh, yes, I think he's all right: he is not quite such a fool as he looks."

"Tom!"

"He has rather a foolish, innocent face, you know. But he is not a fool; not by any manner of means; and he certainly need not have stayed unless he chose. He has plenty of houses to go to—that I know. Not that he told me himself, but it dropped out somehow. He knows lots of people. Thistleblow asked me what family he belonged to, as he seemed to know so many good people. And Jessop

was sniffing out about him too. It seemed odd that I could not tell them more—but as a matter of fact, you know, Ida, we have only met Maurice at Lady De Rigueur's, and taken it for granted he was all right from that."

"Of course," said Ida, decisively. "Quite enough too. We have known Lady De Rigueur ever since we were children, and as we must have *some one* to go by, we could not have a better person. If Lady De Rigueur had Maurice staying in the house, surely we may have him."

"And Maurice is really awfully nice."

"He is just delightful." Jenny sprang into the room. "Isn't he? We call him 'Maurice' to his face now; we——"

"No? You don't?" said Tom, hastily. "Oh, I say, I wish you hadn't," looking really distressed. "Ida, why did you let them?"

"I did not let them, I had nothing to do with it." But the speaker looked undeniably guilty. "The way was this, Tom. We do call him 'Maurice' behind his back——"

"That's nothing. Call him what you please behind his back——"

"But he heard us—that was it—that was the fun," and Jenny's little shrieking voice was uplifted into a still higher key. "He heard us, and couldn't pretend he didn't—for we were regularly in his arms——"

"Good Heavens ! What *does* she mean, Ida ?"

"Let me tell, oh, let me tell," Ida had no chance of answering for the delinquent. "It was just this way, Tom. Louie and I were in the gallery—it was that *dreadfully* wet day, I mean the wettest of all the wets—and we had nothing to do, and so we were talking about the people. And I said—no, Louie said first—'I like Maurice the best,' and then I said, 'So do I. *I* like Maurice best too.' And then I think it was me said, 'Ida likes Maurice too'—and there—all at once was Maurice himself, and he looked rather funny, and as if he wanted to stop us—but I don't believe he had heard a word except his name, for I don't believe he *could*, and——"

"You never told me this before," burst in Ida, with a flaming cheek. "You never told me what you had been saying. You only said he had heard you call him 'Maurice.'"

"That was all he did hear: I am sure it was all. For he made fun at once, saying he had caught us calling him 'Maurice,' and he wished we would do it to his face, for everyone called him 'Maurice'—and all sorts of things like that. And you know, Tom, he has a sort of 'Mauricey' face," concluded the little girl, anxiously.

It was on this occasion that the remark was made.

Tom remained silent.

"Ida said we might," insinuated Jenny, after a minute's pause.

"I said I thought—after all, Jenny is only fourteen and Louie eleven, I told them that I thought—when they asked what I thought—I told them that perhaps for *them*—for *school-girls* with *short frocks* and *hair down*," stammered Ida, with a struggle for impressive conviction which did not hide a certain consciousness of having been culpably weak—"I thought, perhaps, as the mistake had been made, it would be better now to do as they were bid, and make no fuss. If Maurice had been another kind of man, it would have been different."

“I should hope so.” But the big brother was still dubious. “Don’t let anyone else hear you,” he frowned. “Mind that,” shaking his head at the now subdued and penitent Jenny—“and don’t do it oftener than you can help. It is not the thing at all to be calling fellows by their names—not for nice girls—and though you and Louie are not grown up yet, still you have to show that you mean to be nice girls some day. I wouldn’t have had this happen——”

But here the speaker came to a sudden halt. The blue eyes in front of him were beginning to fill, and the corners of a rosy mouth to turn down.

“Well, well, I daresay it doesn’t really matter—much. Never mind, you know. Don’t—I say—don’t cry, you know. After all, as Ida says, it’s only Maurice. Come, you little goose,” pulling a long springing curl that was temptingly near. “Come, never mind—am I not telling you it was only Maurice?”

CHAPTER III.

REACTION AND RECOVERY.

AND now, behold ! a wonderful thing.

Before the next twenty-four hours had elapsed our four young disciples of *de rigueur* had not only recovered entirely from the blasting effects of the "dead failure," but had come to jest upon the subject.

At first, as we know, one and all had alike smarted. Tom had gone about muttering to himself, Ida had poured forth to whomsoever would listen. The younger pair had thirstily picked up information, and sympathised with the utmost intelligence and apprehensiveness.

The case in all its bearings was perfectly understood by Jenny and Louie. Tom's and Ida's wrongs were their wrongs. The blight which had fallen on Duckhill under its new administration affected their loyal young hearts through the hearts of their elders, and if it had

not been for Maurice Stafford the unfortunate quartet would have mourned together in unison for a very much longer time than they did.

But Maurice seemed to see nothing to moan at. Instead of preserving a sombre silence on the subject, and treating it as though it were too appalling for common breath, Maurice opened conversation at the very first general meeting of the family, by a reference to General Thistleblow's disgust and Colonel Jessop's irascibility, which set everybody laughing.

"Do them both all the good in the world," said Maurice, helping himself freely from the sideboard. "Save them a lot of physic. It's awfully bad for old people to have everything go easy. They get ill directly, you know. Nothing like a good stir up. You did both the old gentlemen a turn for which they ought to be grateful, Tom."

("As he calls me Tom, I suppose I may call him Maurice," commented Tom, to himself.) He took note of such things.

"All the same, I wish it had been anyone else who had done them the turn," observed he, aloud. "And as for their being grateful, if you

had seen the faces they made when I tried to apologise——”

“Did you apologise? Oh, I shouldn’t have apologised. What on earth had you to apologise for? What had you done?”

“Brought you all down to a dull, out-of-the-way part of the country in the dead of winter,” said Tom, ruefully, “and then boxed you up in the house.”

“And pulled the strings of the shower-bath overhead? No, no; my good fellow, you are not omnipotent Jove yet. *You* did not box us up—and as for bringing us down here, we need not have come if we had not wished. For my part, I don’t owe you a grudge,” and the conversation had terminated as the reader may imagine.

Before two days had passed the defunct shooting party had come to be shorn of half its terrors in the retrospect; no one shunned the subject in public, or recurred to it bitterly in private. Lady Sophia’s expression had been smartly mimicked by Jenny, and General Thistleblow’s “Bless my soul, this is unendurable!” caught to the life by the same impertinent sprite.

Nobody now minded the weather. It snowed, and it blew; it half thawed, and then froze again; every hope of out-door exercise or amusement had to be abandoned, and not an unhappy face was to be seen within the walls of Duckhill Manor.

This, to be sure, may have been partly due to a reflection which was made aloud many times a day.

“Just think what it would have been to have had all of them still here!” was forever being exclaimed by one and another, and the speculation lent a new zest to whatever was going on at the moment.

“Just *think* what it would have been,” cried Jenny to Louie. “Just think!” (Bang, bang, went battledore and shuttlecock as she spoke!) “We couldn’t have played here, you know. Ida wouldn’t have let us, for the noise. And we should never have been allowed into the drawing-room, even though we couldn’t get down to the vicarage for lessons. We should have had to sit all by ourselves up in the horrid old schoolroom.”

“But why did Ida say we were to sit up

there and not to come into the drawing-room, and now she lets us into the drawing-room? And why——”

“Why, of course, why,” retorted her sister, superiorly. (“Eighty-four, eighty-five; do keep out of that corner, there—I told you, that corner always stops us,” in parenthesis.) “Ida told me all about it,” continued Ida’s interpreter, the game being resumed. “It is not proper for her to be sitting alone with a young man when Tom is in the steward’s room. Tom had to be with Mr. Trusty for nearly two hours to-day. That was why Ida fetched us.”

“Where is Ida now?”

“Writing up in the boudoir. She won’t stay down-stairs, because she says it does not do for her to be about all day while Maurice is here. (Oh, do take care! There! It’s down again!)” as the shuttlecock madly dashed against the wall and rebounded on to the floor. The room was hardly large enough.

“I say, Jenny,” the other player paused before taking up position again. “I say,” began little Louie, a wise smile illuminating her small countenance as she held ready her battledore,

and looked first at it and then at her sister. "Wouldn't—wouldn't Maurice do for Ida, don't you think?"

Jenny simpered.

"Of course I have thought of that before, you very silly girl," she observed, loftily. "I haven't said anything to Ida, because it wouldn't be proper; but of course I have thought of it, and so I daresay has Tom."

"He is so awfully nice."

"Isn't he?"

"And he is just the right age; and he is fair, and she always says she likes fair men; and he has no moustache, and she hates a moustache; and he's tall; and he shoots; and he has such a *wide* laugh; and I know he sings though he won't sing down-stairs, and—and——"

"Of course I can see all that," Jenny was disdainfully acquiescent. "Do you think I haven't seen all that—and a great deal more too? But I did not suppose you would notice anything, as you are only a little girl."

"I am not a little girl. I am quite able to notice. Jenny, did you hear him say he would

like to be snowed up here, and stay on, and on——?”

“*That* might mean anything. He is so good-natured.”

“Don’t you think he cares about Ida, then?” disappointment in every accent.

“How am I to know whether he cares or not?” rejoined the oracle. “How can I tell? I can only tell what I see. Now I think we have talked about it long enough,” primly. “Tom would not like us to talk about it any more. Only I think I may tell you, Louie—and it is very good of me to tell you—that I believe—I—believe—” impressively, “that this is why Tom and Ida have asked down all the people next week. Because, you see, if Ida can’t be alone in the drawing-room next week, and we have got to be at our lessons——”

The door of the room opened.

“Seventy-four—seventy-five,” chirruped out two monotonous, sing-song, all-engrossed young voices, and Ida thought what a good game the children were having, and what a comfort it was that they could so well amuse themselves.

To her, in the plenitude of her twenty sum-

mers, Jenny and Louie were still "the children"—children, moreover, entirely occupied by their lessons and their play, unless directly admitted to social intercourse with their elders.

She and Tom might instruct and inform; but as for her young sisters ever instructing or informing themselves on matters outside their special range, such an idea never really presented itself to the mind of "Miss Barnet."

But Ida was herself conscious of a strange new radiance illuminating all the common habits of her daily life. Our young lady was something of a martyr to habits. She liked to do a set thing at a set hour, and she would give as a reason for being occupied in any particular manner at a particular time, that she "always" did as she was doing then. Therefore it can be easily imagined that so trifling a circumstance as there being a guest of her brother's staying in the house, made no sort of difference to Ida. She disposed of her days precisely as she would have disposed of them otherwise: the household affairs did not suffer, her correspondence was not neglected, her dogs were duly fed and combed.

Outwardly no alteration was visible, or audible. Ida had always had a light step; that it tripped hither and thither more lightly than ever was imperceptible, even to herself. Ordering dinner had ever been with her a sort of sacred duty; on a sudden it kindled into a pleasure.

In writing, her pen was permitted to expand on themes which she would formerly have supposed to be totally void of interest to her correspondent. Emphatically underlined words had a knack of getting into her letters on this wise—

“We have got rid of all those dreadful people, and we are so looking forward to your coming. The weather has been very bad, but the barometer is rising *beautifully*. We *do* hope we are going to have skating.”

As for her pets, her Humpty and her Dumpty, the two silky spaniels who had usually only a limited amount of claim on her attention and charity, nothing now was too good for them. Humpty was allowed to lie on the low cushioned chair from which he was usually ejected with ignominy; Dumpty was en-

couraged to exhibit old tricks and learn new ones.

All this was, as we have said, the outcome of a new feeling within the happy girl's heart. She had begun by merely regarding Maurice Stafford as the one good-natured and sweet-tempered member of the ill-fated shooting party. To him she had turned for consolation and support when black looks were the order of the day. His serenity—or his indifference, whichever it was—had been balm to her wounded spirit, and the very sight of his full-moon countenance coming through a doorway had altered the atmosphere of a whole gloomy apartment.

It was Ida herself who in the first blush of acquaintanceship had used the term “full moon” to Maurice's round, open face. There was nothing particularly distinctive in Mr. Stafford's features, and what little Louie had innocently termed his “nice, wide laugh” emanated from a mouth which was certainly wide enough. There really was a resemblance between the typical moon of children's fairy-tales and the placid physiognomy of Tom's friend.

But gradually allusions to this had been dropped in family asides. Maurice ceased to be "Maurice" on the lips of the elder sister. He was "Mr. Stafford," and Mr. Stafford was quoted and referred to with ever-increasing emphasis. Mr. Stafford was no longer "harmless" and "inoffensive;" the terms seemed to fall away from him of themselves.

No one could say how or when the change was effected; but certainly before many days were over, the guest who had been asked as a make-up, to fill a bachelor's room which otherwise would have been vacant, and who had subsequently been wrought upon to remain behind the more important folks because he could put up with evils which had affrighted and affronted them, was now become the central figure of the canvas on which our young hosts were busy mapping out future triumphs intended to wipe out the remembrance of past failure.

"I say, Ida, aunt Bess will get on all right with Maurice, won't she?"

Very well indeed, Ida thought.

"And uncle Jack? I suppose uncle Jack will do all right too?"

"They would not have much in common, you know, Tom."

"N-no. No, I don't suppose they would. But I could explain to Maurice. I could tell him that uncle Jack is really a very good sort, only a little cantankerous. After all, he does no one any harm; he goes about by himself——"

"Oh, of course. Oh, I never meant for a moment to stop his coming; it was only when you wondered whether he would suit Mr. Stafford; but Mr. Stafford need not have anything to do with him."

"Then about Maud and Caroline, and uncle Theo. Uncle Theo will want nothing but ice, and as long as we can give him good ice I don't suppose he cares who we have with us—man, woman, or child. Maurice is sure to get on with him."

"And with Maud and Caroline too. They are very easy to get on with."

"I am glad the boys can come. I always meant to have them for Christmas, but if they had not been sent home from school sooner we could not have got them now. That break-out of the measles was the very thing for us."

"So it was."

"I am awfully glad to have them."

"So am I. Boys like Harry and Charlie are always nice in a house. And if they are skating all day they will want no other amusement."

"They will all like Maurice."

Ida was silent.

"I say, they will all like Maurice," repeated her brother, looking to her for the confirmation which habit had taught him to expect.

"Yes; oh, yes, certainly." A shade of half-heartedness in the reply, or what seemed such in his eyes, made Tom draw nearer.

"Why do you say it like that?" he demanded, suspiciously.

"Like what?"

"Why did you say 'certainly?'"

"Because I meant 'certainly.'"

"*Did* you mean it?"

"Of course I meant it."

"I don't like 'certainlys,'" quoth Tom, testily.

"I don't understand them. If you don't agree with me, I would much rather you said it out. How is a fellow to know what he is about if

he is put off with a reply like that? If you have anything against Maurice——”

“I have nothing whatever against him.”

“There you go again! ‘Whatever?’ Who is to know what you are driving at with your ‘certainlys’ and your ‘whatevers?’ Why can’t you talk plainly?”

“But I am talking plainly.”

“Do you think these people will like Maurice Stafford, or will they not?”

“I think they are sure to like him.”

Tom almost groaned. “Sure! That’s on a par with ‘certainly.’ ‘Sure,’ indeed! What am I to suppose that means?” (Of all the tiresome people in the world the young master of Duckhill could, when the fit took him, be the tiresomest.) “‘Sure!’” he began again, but Ida burst into the merriest laugh imaginable, and he was so confounded by such frivolity that not another syllable could he ejaculate.

“She could hardly have said less if it had been that little beast of a Jessop,” he muttered, when he presently found himself alone. He was not conversant with girl nature.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SNOW-PLOUGH.

THE following day a diversion was made. Snow had fallen on the previous evening and lay many inches deep upon the ground, but the sky overhead was clear, and the atmosphere brilliant.

“We must get out to-day somehow,” said one and all with the joyous determination of youth and health.

“If we can get down to that stream in the woods we shall find woodcock there to a dead certainty,” said Tom, addressing his guest. “It is a first-rate feeding-place for them, and ducks. I have never known it fail. There might be snipe too. After all this vile weather they will be glad to go anywhere: and their usual feeding-grounds will be in rather a bad way. We’ll be off directly after breakfast.”

“ Oh—h—h ! ” It was from the two little girls that the involuntary groan here burst.

“ Oh ? ” repeated Tom, looking round upon them in surprise. “ What do you mean by ‘ Oh ? ’ I was not thinking of you, of course.”

“ Directly after breakfast ! ” reproachfully murmured Jenny, looking first at her brother and then at Maurice.

“ What on earth does she mean, Ida ? ” Ida was often expected to interpret on this wise.

“ Something was said about a snow-plough, I believe,” replied she. “ Was not that it, Jenny ? The children will have to go to the vicarage, if they can possibly get there, you know, Tom ; and I believe—I fancy—Mr. Stafford said——”

“ He said he would make us a snow-plough, and take us down on it *himself*. And Taffy was to draw it. And he had *often* done it. And he would make the plough himself. And it will be such fun. And, oh, Tom, *don't* say you won't.” The above burst forth in a duet of impetuous demand.

“ A snow-plough, eh ? ” said Tom, good-humouredly. “ Oh, yes, you can have that. Jen-

kins can make you one easy enough. It is rather a good idea. We'll have a seat on the top, and one of the gardener's boys can trot you down—the only thing is, when ought you to be there? I don't know if we could get the plough rigged out soon enough. At what o'clock do your lessons begin?"

"At ten; but——"

"Ten? We can't get you down by ten."

"Oh, no," in chorus. "Oh, no; they would never expect us for *lessons* to-day; but if we could go and just *see* them, and tell them we were coming to-morrow," insinuated Jenny, who had obviously thought out the matter. "If Mr. Stafford," turning anxiously to him, "if he would take us down, and he *said* he would——"

"All right, I will," said Stafford, promptly. We'll square it, somehow. When do you want to go? Morning or afternoon?"

"It's no use putting off shooting till the afternoon," interposed Tom.

"Look here; shall we shoot now, and snow-ride after luncheon?" suggested Maurice. And thus it was arranged.

Bob, the under-gardener, undertook the mak-

ing of the plough. It would be rough, but strong, and warranted to carry three people along the smooth winding of the avenue, which extended almost to the vicarage gate. Taffy would make no objections to drawing it; Bob would answer for Taffy. He would bring it round after luncheon, between two and three o'clock.

"I really see no need why you should be pressed into the service though," Tom turned to his friend, the matter being concluded. "If Bob makes the cart—or whatever we are to call it—he will probably be able to drive it better than either of us could; and he is a very decent fellow, quite fit to look after my sisters. I have known him from a boy. Had we not better take something to eat in our bags, and make a day of it in the woods?"

"Just as you please." Stafford turned indifferently away. "Arrange it anyhow, and I shall be satisfied."

"But you said you would take us." Jenny was too proud to speak, but little Louie's feelings were not so sensitive. "You did say you would," whispered she, persuasively.

“I suppose to-morrow wouldn’t do as well, eh?” suggested Maurice. He was a sportsman, and he rarely had such a chance of sport as was now offered him.

“Oh, to-morrow—or any day: come away, Louie. It doesn’t matter when we go; and it doesn’t matter who takes us.” Jenny seized her sister’s hand. “*I* don’t think much of promises,” continued she, crossing the room with a lofty step. “I never believe in them, especially when they are made by *men*,” vanishing with this Parthian shot.

“I say, do you really want me very much?” called Maurice after the retreating figures.

There was a sound of a halt, and a scuffle in the outer chamber.

“I say—stop a minute,” continued the pursuer, advancing.

But stop! Not they; with Louie already in tears, and Jenny on the verge! How should they ever have looked each other in the face again had they now been caught, and seen? Obviously there had been a moment of uncertainty and indecision, a wild hope in the breast of the younger to be crushed by instant scorn

on the part of the elder ; and the outcome was a scamper, effectual if undignified, which left the room deserted, and the delinquent non-plussed.

“ I say—I’m very sorry,” said he, slowly coming back.

“ Pooh ! ” said Tom. “ I—— ’pon my word, Ida, I don’t think the children ought to behave like that. Eh ? You must talk to them. We can’t have them showing temper, eh ? And really they are old enough to understand——”

“ I never dreamed of its being a shooting day,” interposed Maurice.

“ Pray don’t think any more about it.” There was a heightened colour on Ida’s cheek as she turned towards him, both it and her tone might have meant anything. “ They are only children, you know ; and it was rather—rather a disappointment. I told them before they came down-stairs not to reckon upon it ; but they seemed to think that Mr. Stafford——”

“ Yes ; I did say I would take them. I say, Tom, perhaps I ought, you know.”

Tom, however, had no compunctions himself, and no intention of giving in to those of an-

other. He was annoyed and discomposed at the bare idea of such a thing as relinquishing the excellent sport which at length it was in his power to offer, simply because Jenny and Louie had presumed on the good-nature of their guest. Maurice himself was obviously only wavering under pressure.

"It is perfectly ridiculous," fumed Tom. "Ida, can't you tell him how ridiculous it is?"

But Ida had moved towards the door.

"Women never have any sympathy with sport," said Tom. And in less than half an hour the two set forth.

"There they go!" wailed little Louie from an upper window. "I knew they'd go. Nasty old snow-plough! I don't care a bit about it now. It was Maurice's making it, and us helping him, and he driving, and we sitting up on the seat beside him, and all, that made the fun! To go with Bob!"

"I'm not going with Bob," said Jenny, succinctly.

There was a pause. Obviously the remark had fallen flat.

“I say, Jenny?” a new suggestion in the speaker’s tone.

“Well?” extreme dryness in the retort.

“What if he comes back?”

“Come back? How can he come back?”

“He *may* come back, you know. We were not to start till between two and three o’clock, and——”

“And they have taken their luncheon with them, that they may stay out for the day! It looks as if Maurice were coming back, doesn’t it?” with deep disdain. “I don’t care,” proceeded the indignant Jenny, with true feminine lack of logic. “He needn’t suppose I care. If he doesn’t like to come—if he doesn’t come of his own accord—I am sure *we* don’t want him. But I wouldn’t go and say I’d do a thing, and then not do it just because—because——” with choking voice, “something better turned up. I didn’t think Maurice had been that kind of a man.”

“But we couldn’t expect him not to like to go shooting with Tom?”

“We never did expect him;” Jenny turned fiercely round. “He might have gone with

Tom easily—easily. He might have gone all this long morning, and come in to luncheon; and—and the plough wasn't to be ready till two or three o'clock."

"Well, I say he'll come."

"He won't come."

"He will come. I say he'll come."

"*You* say? What has your saying to do with it?" warming towards a quarrel. "Do you suppose anything *you* say——" The door opened, and the elder sister entered. Each little girl turned away her head. "She is come to scold us," they thought.

But Ida was not come to scold. Ida had been still more deeply wounded than either Jenny or Louie. There had been a little scene on the previous evening, of which no one knew but herself and Maurice.

Maurice, running up the broad staircase in the moonlight, had perceived a slight figure, whose outlines he had learned to know, gazing from a windowed recess upon the silvered landscape without. He had paused, and drawn near. Ida had bidden him note "the flying cloud, the frosty light;" had pointed out this

and that indication of a change in the mood of the elements, and had predicted just the clear, radiant day which followed.

Then he had suggested a flight over the smooth snow, and had asked if she would share it? He would construct a rude car, in which the two could sit, and which any of the sturdy little ponies in the stable could draw, and they would have a snow-ride together.

Ida had laughed and promised. She had looked surprisingly bright and lovely at the moment, and he had experienced a strange sensation while he regarded her. Subsequently the construction of the snow-plough had been mooted in the general circle, and the promise had been made which had haunted the little girls' pillows all through their sleeping hours. Their trip had been openly and joyously discussed; but that other, that preceding one, its forerunner and antecedent — about it Stafford had been dumb. Was innocent Ida to blame if such silence was inexpressibly dear to her heart?

She had stepped down-stairs in the morning

sunshine with all its rays reflected on her countenance. This was her day—the day she had predicted—the day for which she had somehow bargained. It would be the last of freedom, and of that delightful, easy sociability into which the little party had drifted, and which she would gladly have had go on—and on.

True, she had herself drawn up the list of the future occupants of the guest chambers; and it never for a moment occurred to her to hope that anything might happen to interfere with the carrying out of the new programme; but she sighed as she said to herself, “Our last day!” and it needed all the enchanting prospect which that day held out to chase away pensive regrets. Now, for the first time, she began to wonder if it could have been on her account that Maurice Stafford had remained at Duckhill behind the rest. The idea was presumptuous; but presumptuous reckonings have proved to be occasionally true ones.

Maurice had given no reason for staying, and she knew he had been invited elsewhere. As for being bored, idle, or at a loss—he was

the busiest person in the place in his own way. He sawed and cut up wood in the yard; he carried it in, assisted by Jenny and Louie; all three looking so glowing and rosy that Ida could have joined them with pleasure, but for the weight of her young-ladyhood. He put the old gun-room in order, cleaned every gun in the place, melted bullets by a fire of his own construction, whistled, and polished, and rubbed and scrubbed, and needed nobody to tidy up after him.

The only difficulty had been in keeping Jenny and Louie away from such a fascinating playmate. They also hankered after the emery cloth, and the sand-paper; they had besought Ida to let them take down their skates to be cleaned, and made ready for the frost. Ida had demurred; but on the occasion of the request it chanced that Tom was also busy in the gun-room, and since Tom was there, all was right. She had even gone in herself, just to take her own skates, and ask if anyone would kindly—and Maurice had got hold of them before she could finish the sentence. He had furthermore pressed her to stay and see them

done—but this had been too much. Tom's eye had said, "I doubt if Lady De Rigueur would approve," and Ida had meekly withdrawn beneath the glance, feeling somewhat doubtful also whether she should not have carried off the busy little sisters with her. But this she could not find it in her heart to do.

Aware of the precarious nature of their stay, Jenny and Louie, with supernaturally composed countenances, were affecting complete ignorance of anyone's entrance or presence, so absorbed were they in their work. Jenny, on a rough bench close to the window, was to all appearance far too deeply concerned in making the most of the waning light of a winter afternoon to have a moment to spare for conversation or relaxation; Louie was bent double over an all-engrossing iron, which appeared to need not only all her eyes and fingers, but both her ears into the bargain.

"I may as well let them alone," concluded Ida. To do her justice, she only inflicted deprivations and restrictions at the fancied bidding of duty, or of Lady De Rigueur. Lady De Rigueur would, she considered, be satisfied

with her own retirement from the scene in the present instance, and accordingly she had withdrawn after leaving her skates in the possession of Mr. Stafford. How was she to suppose that Mr. Stafford would bring them back to her himself, when finished?

She was in the drawing-room, of course. The drawing-room looked a trifle dull, in spite of a blazing fire whose fitful lights danced over the old-fashioned furniture, and she was inclined to pity her poor little lonely self for being obliged to sit there in state, instead of making one of the merry group she had left, hammering and tinkering to the sound of their own voices, when the door opened and Maurice came in, stood still, and looked around. It was obvious that at first he did not see that the chamber had an occupant. Ida was sunk in a low chair by the fire, and its broad pillows rose on every side. Only the brown coronet of hair which surmounted her shapely head was visible, and Maurice missed it. He had turned to depart, when she sprang up. She could not let him go, knowing that he had come to see her; it was only kind, courteous,

polite to show herself more fully. Even now he did not perceive the movement, having his back turned.

“Oh—ah—Mr. Stafford?” A shy voice faintly quavered through the long room—but it was enough. Retracing his steps with delight, Maurice found his youthful hostess prettier, sweeter, softer, than he had ever before beheld her.

Nor was there a single complaint made in the distant gun-room, although the deserter returned thither no more that day. A tacit understanding on the subject prevailed.

This little act of the piece before us took place, be it remembered, in the afternoon previous to the construction of the snow-plough, so that it will readily be understood how the defection of their idol caused something more than the bitterness of disappointment in the breasts of two of his worshippers. They had been despised, and although they could not have put such a feeling into words, something within each swelling bosom whispered that if Ida, their beautiful and cherished Ida, had been sufficiently appreciated—as till now they

had in their secret souls believed—they would not have been thrown over as they had been.

All the same, the scene which had taken place in the dining-room had been terribly against rules, and now here was Ida come to tell them so. Both hung their heads. But when it appeared that Ida was come to do nothing of the kind, that no syllable of rebuke or admonition fell from her lips, nay, that her manner was peculiarly gentle, almost tender, little Louie nestled tearfully to her side, and Jenny could scarce find voice for a reply. For Ida had come to propose a plan.

The sisters had a low dog-cart, which all three drove by turns—Ida was very just about these turns, and resolute that strict fairness regarding them should be maintained—and she now suggested that the wheels should be taken off this equipage and runners substituted, so that, with a set of pretty bells attached to the harness, they could fly jingling about all over the country.

The snow-plough, she said, was all very well for the avenue, or for some of the woodland paths, but it was hardly the proper sort of

vehicle to be seen in outside their own grounds, and certainly not in the little town four miles off. She would have a proper sleigh, and they could all go in it. They could go in it to church on Sundays. It would be such fun. It would be the only sleigh in the neighbourhood.

Before the speaker had finished, her auditors were all eagerness, all excitement. How soon could the wheels be taken off? How soon could the bells be sent for? She had to sit down to her desk to pen a couple of notes straight away.

And after all, it was really very nice going off in the snow-plough with Bob. At three o'clock, for he could not be ready sooner, Bob came round; and so proud was he of his handi-craft, and so tempting did the funny little vehicle appear, that not a word was said about Jenny's not going, but the two little girls, screaming with delight, took their places on the narrow seat, and, waving their hands back to the watcher on the door-step, were driven off without let or hindrance over the smooth surface of the snow.

"Go very nicely, don't they?" said a voice behind Ida.

How she started !

“ I am afraid I startled you,” proceeded the speaker. “ Tom and I have had a great morning’s sport ; we found both woodcock and wild duck, and made havoc among them. You will say so when you see the bag. But we have been walking about pretty nearly up to our waists in snow in the dells—it is lying deep down there—so I thought I would knock off for to-day, and claim the fulfilment of yesterday’s promise.”

“ They are gone. You are too late.”

“ Too late for them—but, pardon me, not too late for you.”

“ It was not very kind,” said Ida, with a choking voice, “ to disappoint my poor little sisters, when you saw how much it was to them.”

“ I know. That was what I thought.”

“ But you did not stay.”

“ No, I didn’t stay. I felt a perfect brute, but I couldn’t give up the shooting.”

“ Oh, of course. Never mind.”

“ All the morning I have thought of the poor little things—and you.”

"It was no matter for *me*—not in the slightest. I hope you did not think of me for a moment."

"I did not," said Maurice, drily; "not 'for a moment.'" Then, afraid lest she should miss the mark, being simple, "but I believe I thought of you from hour to hour. Miss Barnett, will you forgive me?" he added, after a moment; "you are a sportsman's daughter and sister, can you at all understand the joys of sport? Of course, I don't mean to say I was not a selfish brute, but somehow—well, the truth had better out—I believe if I had the option again, I should do the same as I did. There!—that's a clean breast of it, anyway. And now that you know," with his bold, bright eye fixed full upon her, "now that you know, what have I to expect at your hands? Mercy? —Or——?"

* * * * *

The little girls were greatly astonished to find a different escort awaiting them, on their exit from the vicarage, from that which had brought them thither.

"You see, here I am," announced the un-

abashed culprit of the morning. "I said I should drive you, so I am here to do it. You got the start of me in setting off——"

"Why, we were later than we said; ever so much later."

"You were earlier than I could get up, anyway. And I had to change, and to sit by the fire a little bit, and hear what your sister had to say—but I pelted down when I did set off, I can tell you; and here I am. Up you get; that's right. We'll scud over the snow like lightning. Now then, Taffy, look alive. I am going to give your sister a turn when we get back."

"Why, it will be nearly dark when we get back!" exclaimed little Louie, holding on with both hands.

But Jenny gave her a pinch, behind Maurice's back.

"What did it matter about the dark, you very silly girl?" said she severely, afterwards, the two being established on the watch, and the sleigh having gone forth again. "People *like that*," with burning emphasis, "don't mind the dark. They like the dark. It is only not

dark enough," as in the dim twilight the little car was seen approaching, and clear, ringing voices heralded the return of the deeply interesting pair.

"It's all right," added the little girl to herself, with a long-drawn sigh of satisfaction and relief. "All—all right. She wouldn't have gone out with him if it hadn't been; and she wouldn't be talking like that, and laughing like that—oh, and I do believe they're off again! Yes, they are—they are!" in ecstasy. "Look, Louie, look! They're off again, and it's quite light outside—quite light enough; look how they fly along! Quick!" for Louie had scrambled down from the window-sill, thinking no more was to be seen. "Quick! before they're out of sight. There, can't you see? That dark thing just before the trees; that's them. Now they're in the trees. How far will they go, I wonder? We'll wait here; this is the place to see. But, Louie, we'll tell nobody—not even Tom. Remember that, Louie. Oh, how glad—glad—*glad*—I am. It's all right—and I said it would be!"

CHAPTER V.

GENERAL THISTLEBLOW'S DISCOVERY.

“WELL, well, well! Ha! ha! ha! That is the best thing I have heard for a long time! 'Pon my word, that is amusing! Caught in his own toils, eh? Caught just where the shoe will pinch like red-hot pincers! Poor young fellow,” cried a mocking voice full of delighted malevolence, as two elderly gentlemen stood in the window of a St. James's club. “Poor boy! Bless my soul! I never was more taken aback in my life. I thought if there was one being on earth unlikely to be tripped up in that way, it was my most respectable young ward, Tom Barnet. That he should be harbouring the biggest scamp in England! It's—bless my soul!—it's the best joke out! Ha! ha! ha!”

“I thought it devilish queer at the time that he could tell us nothing about this Stafford,” chuckled General Thistleblow's com-

panion, who was none other than the Colonel Jessop already introduced to our readers. "Clarke and I said so to each other. No one knew where Stafford hailed from. He was not an old schoolfellow; he was not a Cambridge man; and he was no relation. I said to Clarke, 'What on earth is his claim on Duckhill?' There isn't shooting here for every waif and stray whom Tom Barnet chances to pick up; and if it turned out that Stafford was a crack-shot—as I suppose it would have done—all the more reason for *not* asking him. Let him go where there is better sport, or more of it. Duckhill is only so-so."

"Hum! So-so? I don't know about that. I expect if we could have got at it, we should have been very fairly satisfied. I have shot the Duckhill woods for many a year past, and the bags never disgraced us. For my part I had no objection to Tom's asking whom he chose, and fully expected to find one or two young fellows of his own age; but what I can't get over is the joke of his having innocently invited down to that quiet old place one of the fastest men going. I think I see our

demure young landlord's face when he finds out what he has done."

"You are sure he did it in ignorance?"

"Ignorance? Bless my soul, Jessop, you don't know the boy. He is simply eaten up with pomposity and—and priggishness. Mind you, I am not saying a word against the lad"—with a twinge of compunction; "he has always behaved civilly enough to me; I have not a complaint to make; on the whole I—yes, it is only fair to say I have a sneaking regard for Tom; if he would but knock about the world for a year or two, and have the starch taken out of him, he might quite possibly turn into a very decent fellow. It is the confounded solemnity with which he treats every trifling difficulty that occurs either in his own or his sisters' paths that staggers me. He still thinks it his duty to come to me for advice every now and then, you know. 'Pon my soul, sometimes it's all I can do to give it without bursting out laughing in his lugubrious face."

"I expect you think he would have been none the worse for advice in the present instance, however?"

“That’s it. He comes to me to know about all sorts of things I haven’t the slightest interest in, and don’t care the scratch of a pen about, and when he has anything in hand that I *could* help him with he is as close as a house. Of course I ought to have been consulted about this confounded shooting party. I should have looked all round, and gone into the matter with the greatest care; and we might have had a very nice little time of it, even if the weather did play old Harry with the shooting. I could have got—let me see”—musing, then with a swift recollection that he certainly would not have got the auditor whom he was addressing, “I could have got more than enough of the right sort, anyhow. Instead of which poor Tom goes and makes a mull of it with Clarke and his wife, the Inderwicks, Wortlebury, those two Vernons, and Maurice Stafford,” each name in succession pronounced with its due contempt.

“My wife has been in bed ever since she came home, from the cold she caught on the journey back,” quoth Jessop.

“No wonder. A cross-country journey in

December is a deuced unpleasant performance. I thought I was in for something myself—but it passed off.”

“Anyhow it was better than staying on. To look out of one’s window day after day, and see nothing but drenching rain and clouds almost sweeping the ground, is enough to give anyone the blues.”

“They are frost-bound at Duckhill now, which is worse.”

“I don’t know about that. There will be some cocking in a good frost.”

“And that’s what someone else is thinking,” said General Thistleblow, significantly.

“Eh? Oh, that fellow Stafford. Yes, confound him, he has got the better of us in that respect. But he has had to pay for it. A week of Duckhill in driving sleet, with not a soul to talk to but four children, and nothing to do but play at ball with them with the billiard balls,” cried little Jessop with a malicious cackle. “I say even woodcock shooting would be dear at the price.”

“Pooh! pooh! You forget; you and I are old fogies, Jessop. Stafford is a youngster

himself. What's his age? We'll say eight-and - twenty. Eight - and - twenty to thirty. When I was thirty I should have asked for no better luck than to be shut up in a country house with a pretty girl like Ida Barnet; and you may take my word for it, Maurice Stafford knows how to improve such an opportunity."

"He didn't seem that sort of man, either," said Jessop, musingly.

"No indeed, that's the beauty of it. He didn't seem in that or any other way to be the man we now find he is. Ha! ha! ha! It makes me laugh whenever I think of it. At this very moment I daresay if we could look in at Duckhill we should see Tom and his sisters setting off for church"—(it was Sunday morning)—"and the accommodating Stafford trotting alongside, prayer-book in hand—Ida's prayer-book, you may believe,——"

"Oh, come, Thistleblow, draw it mild. They don't get Maurice Stafford to church by all accounts. He would be mad with fright at the idea. Flirting with a pretty girl may be all very well, but not church-going; no, by Jove!"

shaking his head sagaciously, "not church-going."

"I shouldn't mind wagering what you like that if anyone goes, Stafford goes. Bless my soul! would he be such a fool as to affront the whole set of them—to say nothing of losing a nice walk, and all sorts of chances—just because he mayn't happen to be up in theology? He has been at some decent school, I suppose. He must remember what he did at Eton, or at Winchester."

"It would puzzle me to remember what we did at Eton."

"You? But you are an old reprobate; Stafford is a young one. It can't be such a very great effort of memory to look back a dozen years or so. Oh, to church he goes, you may believe; and poor honest Tom and that mettlesome Ida to boot, are so taken with their new friend, and so edified by his piety——"

"Ha! ha! ha! It's too bad; 'pon my word, it's too bad."

"What's too bad?"

"Someone ought to tell them, Thistleblow."

"Someone will tell them fast enough—when

the time comes. The time for telling has not yet arrived. Wait a bit; I shall have a jubilant letter from my late ward accompanying a leash of woodcock and a couple of wild duck. He will tell me that he and Stafford shot them on such and such a day. He thinks he has got a great gun in Stafford, and that it will be a crow over me if he can show that Stafford got some shooting after all. *Then* I come down upon him. I say, 'My dear fellow, as your late guardian, and your father's old friend, will you take a well-meant hint without being offended?' Then I launch out and tell him all that you and I already know about this sly reynard who has got inside his quiet barnyard; oh, I will make his eyes grow round, I promise you. And I must own it will give me some pleasure to do so. In any discussions we have had hitherto, somehow or other it has always been Tom who has taken the high ground; and what with his long face and his scruples of conscience I was often on the point of chucking up the guardianship in old days. I felt myself in such a confoundedly false position. It should have been I—not he—to raise scruples and talk

about conscience. What had a boy in his teens to do with a conscience? He ought in common civility to have left that sort of talk to older people."

"His conscience will sing rather small now, Thistleblow."

"If it doesn't," Thistleblow laughed, "I know whose fault that will not be, eh, Jessop? Oh, I have him now; I have him on two counts, as the lawyers say. First, I insinuate, 'What a thundering young fool you were to ask an absolute stranger to your house, where you had not even a resident chaperon for your pretty sisters!'—and second, 'What the deuce did you mean by asking that stranger to stay on behind the rest of us, your own and your father's old friends?' That will be the gist of my letter, and it will be a stiff one for our young friend. He won't be able to look quite so loftily at me after receiving that document, as he has been in the habit of doing of late."

An acquaintance here interposed, and the dialogue terminated.

It was a glorious winter afternoon in Piccadilly. Not a trace of mist or fog marred the

brilliancy of the atmosphere, and a fiery sun whose beams spread far and wide, sank with unabated sovereignty in a cloudless sky.

All the world was out of doors, and all the world of fashion was engaged in making calls. Strutting along the familiar pavement with his chest well out, and his blue overcoat comfortable buttoned, our little Colonel experienced an internal glow of satisfaction of which he had not been conscious an hour before.

He had gone to his club in rather a melancholy frame of mind. His wife was ill, his house was dull, and he had not been asked anywhere to dinner. Furthermore, he did not know exactly where to go for news, talk, and afternoon tea. Not that he took tea—he hated it—but he liked to drop in at good houses while that lively function was going on, liked to think he was obliged to “put in an appearance” at affairs to which others were going, or at all events that he “owed a call” in this or that smart neighbourhood.

He did not as a fact know many houses which he could thus enter. Later on in the year there would be more; but in December, before

even Parliament had met, who could be expected to have "rounds" to make?

Still, it was a nuisance to hang on at the club throughout a whole fine afternoon, and the prospect had made the hapless little Jessop, as we have said, melancholy. With Thistleblow's news in his pocket, what better could he do than make for Lady Sophia Clarke as sharp as he could go, and he could not have desired a better house to call at than the Clarkes' huge corner mansion in Chesterfield Gardens.

CHAPTER VI.

A DRAWING-ROOM IN MAYFAIR.

COLONEL JESSOP had not waited till now to pay his respects in so eligible a quarter as that to which we left him wending his way in the last chapter.

The one redeeming feature of that disastrous shooting party which had resulted in his wife's sore throat and his own lumbago, was the introduction effected between them and the more august denizens of Mayfair.

The Jessops had cringed to the Clarkes, and the Clarkes had permitted the cringe. They had not been genial; they had not emitted more than the faintest flicker of civility, but they had "hoped to meet," and on that hope Jessop had already traded.

He had looked in at five o'clock on the previous Sunday, and had been endured. Something had been said about calling on Mrs. Jes-

sop; and upon hearing that the hardships of the return journey, undertaken in such inclement weather, had resulted in an actual illness, Lady Sophia, who was nothing if not a doctor, had prescribed with vehemence and uplifted finger.

Jessop had caught at the opportunity. His poor wife would be so grateful, so docile.

Then the poor wife had been neither grateful nor docile, being a woman who could never see an inch beyond her own nose, and who in the present instance could not perceive that drinking dandelion tea and breathing sanitas out of a special inhaler, was little enough to do for the reward of Lady Sophia's favour. Accordingly the intimacy had not ripened, and all her august ladyship's medical interest and tardily aroused goodwill might have been allowed to die away without result, had Jessop not been afforded a chance of re-awakening the latter by the *bonne bouche* he had picked up from his old friend Thistleblow.

Somehow he had an instinct that Lady Sophia would rate at its true value General Thistleblow's discovery about Maurice Stafford.

He had not heard Stafford's name once mentioned in Chesterfield Gardens, but he had an observant eye; he was tolerably sure that the tongue which had erst been loudest in praise of Maurice would not have been all at once and altogether dumb about him thereafter, had there not been a sore spot somewhere.

"She will not be sorry to hear we were all mistaken in him," he shrewdly concluded, with a swift recollection of a little scene at Duckhill.

He had been standing by when Mr. Stafford's intention of remaining behind had been announced, and when in reply to Lady Sophia's authoritative interrogations and exclamations the delinquent had answered by the briefest and most rudimentary of assertions; and it had struck him that the proud, imperious, domineering woman he saw before him, would never forgive such a moment.

Lady Sophia was—ahem!—a tartar.

A charming, high-bred creature, no doubt, with every right to a spirit of her own, but not a person to lightly offend. He had caught his breath with amazement when Stafford thus offended.

Stafford, he had told himself, was an idiot to behave so.

That a woman of Lady Sophia's rank and status should condescend personally to look out his train, and intimate that he was to share her own and Sir Robert's travelling compartment, was a thing to be proud of, not to be snubbed. The young fool was blind, stone blind, not to see what a feather he might have had in his cap. He had thrown away his luck, and it might prove that he had done still worse.

"What will she say now?" triumphantly chuckled the malicious little gossip as he hurried along. "She set us all the example at Duckhill. My wife and Inderwick's wife only followed suit. And Lady Sophia is one of your virtuous women, by Jove! A devilish virtuous woman, I should say. I'd wager a good round sum she never speaks to Mr. Maurice Stafford again. No more looking out of trains, by Jove! No more proffers of seats in carriages. Ha, ha, ha! All Thistleblow cares about is to deal that soft young Barnet one in the eye—but what is young Barnet to me? As long as he does not inveigle me down to

that old rain tank of his a second time, he may drown whom he pleases in it, for aught I care."

Aloud. "Lady Sophia at home?" finding himself on the doorstep of the house he was going to.

Lady Sophia was at home; and, truth to tell, Lady Sophia did not look overjoyed at the sight of her new visitor. She had given Colonel Jessop a finger and a smile the previous Sunday, and had warmed up towards the end of his stay so far as to send messages and prescriptions to his wife. But it was too soon for him to have called again; she was not sure that it was not presuming; for a full half minute she was inclined to consider that it was presuming, and in consequence to turn the cold shoulder, and turn off the still colder smile—but anon a thought occurred.

The room was full, and a private conversation possible; she would give Colonel Jessop the benefit of a private conversation.

"Bitter weather this must be in the north, must it not?" she began, easily. "We were lucky in making our escape from Yorkshire

when we did, Colonel Jessop; I daresay Mr. Stafford has fled the scene also by this time."

"I fancy not," rejoined Jessop, delighted to have his tongue thus directed. "I have just come from the club where General Thistleblow was talking about Stafford, and he said——"

Other visitors demanded the attention of his hostess.

("Now, will she return to the subject or not?" pondered Jessop.) He had scarcely time to ask himself the question.

"And what did General Thistleblow say?" pursued Lady Sophia, who was at any rate mistress of her own drawing-room, and not to be thwarted by any interruption, or other adverse circumstance. "Was Mr. Stafford still at Duckhill?"

"Very much at Duckhill, Lady Sophia. Being deluged, submerged, and probably by this time hung all over with icicles! A terrible fate, is it not? And that is not the worst either."

"Indeed?" replied the lady, sharply. "To be deluged, submerged, and hung over with icicles ought to satisfy anybody. It sounds

like a modern rendering of the old sentence, 'To be hanged, drawn, and quartered.' "

"Excellent! Very good. He! he! he!" giggled Jessop. ("It is a serious matter," quoth he to himself, "when a woman like Lady Sophia makes a jest.") "Excellent, indeed. But all the same, I assure your ladyship there are worse things even than hanging, drawing, and quartering. For instance," with a sense of being keenly jocular, "what do you say to being bored to death?"

"Bored to death? Nonsense." Despising the jester, it was not worth Lady Sophia's while even to smile at so absurd an anti-climax. Had she not desired an auditor for something especial she had to say, the little colonel would have had no more of her attention. But as it was: "If he were bored, why did he not come away with the rest of us?" demanded she. "You don't suppose, Colonel Jessop, that a man like Maurice Stafford stops a minute longer anywhere than suits his own book?"

"A man like Maurice Stafford?" echoed Jessop, faintly. He perceived that the *coup* on which he had been relying for future

favours, and a possible invitation to dinner—the Clarkes gave good dinners—was likely to fall flat.

“Yes, a man like Maurice Stafford,” repeated Lady Sophia, with unmistakable significance. “Now that I know the man Maurice Stafford is—which I did *not*, I confess, a fortnight ago. If you did, Colonel Jessop?” with threatening brow.

“’Pon my word, I knew nothing about him, nothing whatever, Lady Sophia. I—I had not even heard the name,” panted the terrified Jessop. (“A deuced awkward woman to deal with,” muttered he to himself.)

“None of us knew, I suppose,” resumed the lady, her frown relaxing; “and what annoys me most is to think he was clever enough to take us all in——”

“Seemed such a nice fellow—easy to please—quiet—gentlemanlike,” murmured Jessop.

“Oh, gentlemanlike, of course. The one thing he was—and is. No one could say the man was not a gentleman. But that Sir Robert and I, who have always been so extremely particular, and who disapprove so strongly of the

ways of fast young men, should have been let in by a party of children"—(Poor Tom! Poor Ida!)—"and actually made to stay in the house, and—hobnob, for that is Sir Robert's word for it—with a worthless, dissipated young man who had to leave the army for debt, and has been mixed up in all sorts of shocking transactions besides, it—it really—really I don't know—I don't really know how to speak of it."

("How upon earth did she get hold of all this?" cogitated Jessop.)

His strong card was trumped, but he would still endeavour to win a trick or two. Lady Sophia obviously knew all there was to know about the delinquent Stafford, but he could agree and abuse, condole and conjecture.

"It certainly was a mistake," he said, wagging his head with profound gravity.

"A mistake, Colonel Jessop? Well, if you choose to call it so. But I call it a piece of very great impertinence. We go down to an uncomfortable, out-of-the-way country house—we take a troublesome and expensive journey"—(Lady Sophia was an economist)—"we put our plans very considerably out, in order to

do a kindness to the orphan children of an old friend"—("In order to give Sir Robert a week's good winter shooting," internally amended Jessop)—"and we find domesticated at Duckhill," proceeded the speaker, not regarding truth as rigidly as she might have done, "this very—very undesirable guest. Naturally we were off our guard. We found Mr. Stafford pleasant, and we—and I—for it was I more than Sir Robert, I allow, permitted him to make advances——"

("Made advances towards him," interpreted Jessop's mental guide.)

"Which it will be extremely awkward now to repel," concluded her ladyship, stating her own view of the case with engaging faith in his credulity.

Jessop bowed.

("Let her run on," he thought, "let her run on.")

"I even invited him here"—Lady Sophia had now got the bit well between her teeth—"I told him Sir Robert and I would be very glad if he would call; and, indeed, he nearly travelled back with us——"

("Uncommonly nearly!")

"We had proposed returning to town by the same train."

("Which you looked out.")

"And I had a little dinner party arranged for this week to which I had meant to invite him."

("But to which you had not invited me. And I could have come without my wife, whom you know to be ill in bed! 'Pon my word, you deserved to have the tables turned upon you, you nasty, tuft-hunting old vixen!" Jessop's temper, never sweet, was now giving way. "To go and pester with your invitations an unprincipled 'young blackguard who will laugh at them in his sleeve, and pass over a man of position and means, and respectability to boot!")

He felt more angry with Maurice Stafford than he had done yet.

Up to the present moment he had simply seen in General Thistleblow's discovery a chance for bettering his acquaintanceship with the eligible Sir Robert and Lady Sophia Clarke; and while Thistleblow was revelling

in the opportunity afforded him for revenging the attitude preserved towards himself by his hitherto irreproachable ward, Jessop was mentally turning over all he heard, and selecting for use such of it as might serve his own ends.

But now that he perceived how much greater had been the impression made on his austere hostess than he had been aware of at the time, he experienced a new sensation. He also had a crow to pick with Maurice Stafford.

As a matter of fact, every individual member of the ill-fated shooting party at Duckhill Manor now felt that they had been "done" by Maurice.

They had not liked one another. They had been about as badly assorted a set of people as could have been got together under one roof.

In their simplicity and utter ignorance of the world, it had seemed to the ingenuous young hosts when devising their programme, that certain people of a certain order, and with certain tastes, would naturally amalgamate. They had, as we know, bestowed an infinitude of pains upon the task of selection, and had

fancied themselves highly in luck when ready acceptances had poured in, and not a single defaulter made a room vacant at the last.

Subsequently they had supposed that it was only the rain which spoilt everything—but it was not only the rain.

It was not only the outer atmosphere which was heavy.

The plain facts of the case had been that scarcely a man or woman present had had a good word for another, with a solitary exception—that exception being Maurice Stafford. Into the rivalries and jealousies of the rest Maurice had not entered. He had been the confidant of detraction, of backbiting, of sly hints and innuendoes—and he had discreetly kept every word so uttered to himself.

At the time this had won him golden opinions. A round, good-humoured face which could be trusted was not to be met with every day; and as one disconsolate hour after another had been dragged idly through, the possessor of this inestimable treasure had grown to be more and more in request.

Everyone by turns had appropriated Mau-

rice. In the end they literally struggled for him. General Thistleblow, who but rarely proffered a civility, had, as we know, extended the hospitality of his club; the taciturn and aggrieved Vernons, who had expected a smarter gathering and a bigger place, had owned to a yacht when alone with Maurice, and had offered a berth therein for a Mediterranean trip which was to be kept dark from Tom Barnet; and Lady Sophia Clarke, most remarkable of all! had pounced upon an A.B.C. time-table, and insisted upon it that Mr. Stafford's train back to town was the same as her own and Sir Robert's.

It had been something of a shock to everybody to leave Maurice standing placidly on the doorstep when the carriages drove off from Duckhill.

They had felt themselves severally aggrieved. Each one had meant to have him. None of them, at any rate, had dreamed of the Barnets having him. The poor Barnets! They did seem such an utterly insignificant little flock for the favourite to be wasted upon!

To be sure there was consolation in the

thought taken from one point of view. Since Lady Sophia was not to have Maurice, it was something that neither Mrs. Jessop nor Mrs. Inderwick, neither Lord Wortlebury nor General Thistleblow had thwarted her in the matter; and her ladyship's feelings were, with proper variation, the feelings of the rest. They were disconcerted, but not vociferous.

It was only now—now on hearing how one and all had been duped, tricked, taken in by a frank eye and pleasant voice—that the blasés, cynical men and women who had allowed themselves to be thus over-reached, opened cry as with one accord, and gnashed their teeth with bitter chagrin and unavailing regrets.

Little did the four poor innocents whose misbehaviour was now on every angry lip imagine the thunderbolt that was in store for them!

CHAPTER VII.

“YOUR UNCLE AND I WOULD QUITE APPROVE.”

MEANTIME who more supremely resigned to fate than the young host of Duckhill, as he surveyed his freshly arrived batch of guests, and contrasted their joyous, anticipatory countenances with the blank looks of dissatisfaction and despair which memory was for ever bringing before his eyes.

A dozen nice easy people, with whom he and his sisters were at home, who made light of disagreeables, jested at disasters, and had become friends all round on the way down, were now installed in the spare rooms of the manor.

“Capital!” cried Tom to himself. “Capital!”

His weather would no longer be abused, nor his billiard balls found out. He could announce ten degrees of frost, and be afraid of nobody.

“Now, Aunt Bess, no sitting over the fire, you know. Aunt Tibbie’s coming out, and so must you. We will find some way of keeping you warm; we’ll push you about in chairs. Eh? What? What do you say? Oh, the ice is as safe as a house; we have had the ponds swept from end to end, and every living soul ought to be out upon them this glorious morning.”

“My dear boy, I am afraid——”

He laughed.

“But it is so very cold.”

“Can’t have skating without cold, ma’am. And what would Harry and Charlie say if we had got them down here and no skating?”

“Well, I’ll come. But, Tom,” cried his aunt, as with an elated nod and a “Meet you at the ponds, then,” he was turning away, “but Tom, one thing. I just want to ask you this one thing. I had no opportunity last night. This young Mr. Stafford—he is a friend of yours—he seems very nice—and I find he has been at Duckhill nearly a fortnight——”

“He came with the shooting party, you know, Aunt Bess.”

"I know. Yes, Ida told me ; but the shooting party all left at the end of the week——"

"Oh, before a week ; they wouldn't stay a week."

"And Mr. Stafford stayed on. Was there any—a hem !—reason for his staying ?"

"Well, you see—the fact was—I don't suppose one could call it much of a reason—but we sort of wanted him," said Tom, with rather an embarrassed laugh. In his heart of hearts he knew that strict propriety had been evaded. "We did have a time of it with those others, Aunt Bess ; I do assure you it was simply horrible. Of course it was a mistake our attempting that sort of party—at least I suppose it was—but they paid us out, anyhow. If we had only had *someone* to boss our side we might have managed ; but, as it was, they regularly bullied us in our own house. We seemed to need Maurice to stop on and comfort us. You have no idea what a comforting fellow he is."

"I can quite believe it. A very agreeable young man indeed. So good-humoured and well behaved."

“He’s most *awfully* well behaved—that’s just what he is.”

“And your sisters like him?”

“Ask them. Just you ask them, and you’ll hear what they say. Ida was quite pleased to have him stay—for, of course, I consulted Ida—and we agreed that as he was here—and if I put it to him that it was because he *was* here we asked him on—there would be nothing odd in his staying. I hope you don’t think there was anything odd, aunt Bess?”

Had General Thistleblow been present he would have beheld in the speaker’s wistful countenance food for unrestrained mirth. Tom’s aunt, however, saw nothing to amuse. Like himself, she was simple and serious.

“I am sure you and dear Ida always act properly, Tom; and your uncle and I often hold you up as patterns in that respect. I merely thought—oh, it was nothing your asking Mr. Stafford, nothing at all—I merely wondered—it seemed a little peculiar his caring to stay——”

“You think he finds it stupid?” suggested her nephew, a little red in the face. “I dare-

say he does. But, at any rate, he has never said so to us. Those others did. You should have heard how they grumbled. That little beast of a Jessop," drawing nearer, ice and skating forgotten,—“you know Colonel Jessop of the Engineers, don't you? Well, but you know who he is, then? He and my poor father were brother officers, and I thought he would like to come and shoot here once again—he used to come in the old days—and we have good winter shooting if we have nothing else. He accepted all right, and down he came, he and his wife, gladly enough; but when it turned out that we couldn't shoot because of the weather, he grew as sour as possible, and grumbled from morning till night. And what's more, he went and—and found fault. Ida said he turned up his nose at our dinners. Well, we haven't a swell cook, that's a fact; but I thought she did rather particularly well when those people were here. Jessop said she had only one soup. Well, she did give it us once or twice over, but it was a ripping soup, and I was always glad to see it. That was it again last night, aunt Bess.”

“A very nice soup, indeed, Tom.”

“There, I knew you would say so. So does Maurice. He has had that soup off and on for a fortnight, and he never leaves a spoonful on his plate. He eats straight through the rest of the courses, too, for I have been watching him. Once there was a singed pudding—I don’t say he ate that, because we had it sent away; but he made believe not to smell anything, and talked to the dogs. I believe Jessop would have had out his pocket-handkerchief. Don’t you think, aunt Bess, that it is not—not exactly fair of people to treat you like that? Even though Ida and I don’t have things quite right, we mean to——” the muscles of his honest mouth set fast to repress all indication of wounded feeling.

His aunt, however, was not to be put off with details of Colonel Jessop, and other people in whom she had no interest.

Probably—for human nature is the same everywhere—it did not altogether displease her that the fine people to whom her nephew and niece had given precedence when reopening the hospitable halls of their forefathers should have been out of sympathy with Duckhill under its new conditions.

To be sure, it had been laboriously explained that pheasant shooting being the *raison d'être* of the party, sportsmen and their belongings only would claim to be included in it, and the present guests owned not a shot among them. Nevertheless, Mrs. Lytton could not help saying to herself that after all there was no need for the shooting party to have been the *first* party, and that dear Tom and Ida had carried their love of precedent a little too far in making it so. It was quite to be expected that two such young, inexperienced hosts should fall into a hundred little errors when thrown entirely on their own resources, without any older head to fall back upon.

Had the shooting party been an unmixed success, it would, as Tom had divined, have been a triumph for the givers thereof; but perhaps it would not have warmed the blood of kinship in the hearts of their homelier relatives as did now the sense of participation in their wrongs.

With such participation, however, all interest in the previous guests ended; it was with Maurice Stafford alone that Mrs. Lytton's

thoughts were now busy, and about him she had, as may have been guessed, jumped already to a very natural conclusion. Certainly she had been summoned to Duckhill to preside over dear Ida's affairs.

Here was a nice young man of suitable age and prepossessing exterior, apparently domesticated at her nephew's country house, very little having been said as to when he had come, and nothing at all as to when he was going away.

It was plain that he was very much at home: as much at home as a man could be. Sundry little references had slipped out, allusions had been made, it had been let fall that Mr. Stafford had not only been brooming the ponds himself, but that he had kept others at the arduous occupation long after the general desire had been to slip away. Ida had laughed at the autocrat of the ice; Jenny and Louie had dubbed him a tyrant, and likened him to a slave driver.

To be called a slave driver argues a high pitch of favour and intimacy.

"He would do very nicely," cogitated the fond relative. "Quite good-looking enough.

And so agreeable and good-humoured. Dear Tom doubtless knows all about his character and principles ; Tom was always so particular about his friends, dear fellow. And as I gather that Mr. Stafford has left the army and is in no profession, he must have some fortune. A man does not leave the army without having private means to fall back upon. Oh, I fancy we shall have everything settled very comfortably. But now, if dear Ida would only confide in me ! There are so many ways in which an older person can be of use. I could make up some little parties ; arrange some little evening entertainments. Ida is not—not—she was always remarkably independent as a child ; never seemed to *need* one, nor to *turn* to one ; but still, perhaps in the case of a lover——” and the result of such reflections had been that first of all it was absolutely necessary to find out if Maurice Stafford were, or were not, a lover.

For this end Tom must now be detained.

“So every one complained, and grumbled, and finally left in dudgeon ? Very rude of them,” pronounced she, when the young man’s

bosom had been discharged to the full ; “ very bad manners. Mr. Stafford showed himself a better bred man——”

“ I don’t think it was that, you know, aunt Bess.”

“ How not that, Tom ? ”

“ I don’t believe it had anything to do with manners. If it had been only good manners we should have found it out among us sharp enough. We aren’t fools. People think we can’t see through them, but we do ; and I tell you what, even the children knew that Maurice was sorry for us, and sort of liked us.”

“ I am sure he did. I never supposed for a moment that he did not. Still, he has pleasant manners, Tom.” Mrs. Lytton was hardly logical. “ He has pleasant manners ; and if he has also a good heart, all the better. I am sure, dear Tom, I—we—your uncle and I, would—would quite—we should quite approve of him.”

She had reached her point ; Tom’s lips had actually opened for a reply, when—provocation extraordinary !—a step was heard in the ante-room.

Had Mrs. Lytton been an impatient woman she must have bitten her tongue with chagrin, so unfortunate, so cruelly mistimed was an interruption at the moment.

The moment was unique. She had caught her man, caught him in a complaining, confidential humour—(Tom was seldom confidential with anyone but his sisters)—and caught him, best luck of all, while yet the day was young, and there were many hours left in which she could plot and plan.

And now to have to turn her head, and reply to the tittle-tattle of a calm intruder who merely wanted to know when the post went out, and if she had any letters to send?

It was her own slow-of-step and of speech husband who had meandered in, and who was now obtusely blundering on with one tiresome question after another, blind to her tapping foot and knitted brow. What evil spirit had sent him her way just now? And there he must needs stand stolidly still upon the glowing hearth-rug with an air of having found a good place on a cold day, and of having all the day before him wherein to enjoy it.

Tom, too, had turned to address his uncle, and opened a new conversation. There was no need to have done that. Had no one spoken to him, and had she looked, and winked, and coughed significantly, even her good John could hardly have failed to perceive that something was expected of him, and his perceptions might have been guided in the right direction. He might have been got rid of under pressure. But to have Tom starting a moot question about farm hands and farm produce! It was really annoying. Dire necessity sharpened her wits.

“Well, if I am to go out, I suppose I must put on my things,” she exclaimed, as though setting her seal to a previous compact. “Will you wait for me one moment?” addressing her nephew, and shutting the lid of her recently opened writing-case with a snap. Writing and everything else must give way at a pinch. “As you say, Tom, the morning is too fine to be spent within doors. You shall escort me down to the ponds.” “And you shall tell me all about this interesting love-affair,” added the speaker, in her heart.

Tom signified acquiescence, and away she went.

It was something of an effort to go. Elderly ladies who have to resort to bonnets and mantles for outdoor wear, do not care about getting themselves veiled and gloved and rigged solemnly out at an early hour of the morning, more especially when there is but little chance of their being able to keep dry footed, and when they have to hold their skirts up on every side.

Snow and frost are welcome visitants to the young; but if one cannot jump and shout and keep one's blood boiling with mirth and exercise, they are robbed of some of their attractions. It is not wildly exhilarating to potter up and down a small space of swept ground, and make the most of every inch of clearance, even though the sun does shine overhead, and the landscape, pure and sparkling, cheer the eye. I fancy Tom's aunt would have enjoyed the sunshine and the snowy scene more from her arm-chair in the boudoir window, where she had been so co-sily established before her nephew sought her out, than she did while trotting backwards and forwards along the slippery edge of the ponds.

And, after all, she had gained nothing by her little manœuvre. Tom, indeed, had been in the hall as in duty bound, when armed *cap-à-pie* she descended from her room; but with him had been the two schoolboys, her own boys, the pride and delight of her life, and it was explained by both at once that they had come up on purpose to bring her down to the scene of action, and had cleared a path for her benefit, and borrowed a chair on which to wheel her about.

The dear fellows! It was impossible to be cross with them, or even to allow to her proud and gratified self that they had done the wrong thing.

Her little talk with Tom must wait. Oh, what did it matter? Nothing at all. She would really prefer to wait. She had said enough for one day. Mrs. Lytton had a knack of discovering that her inclinations had been forestalled in the most wonderful way by those precious boys of hers; and, as a revelation of motherhood, it must be owned that whereas the offending husband had been tapped at and frowned at, the still worse offending

sons were now received with open arms. Let those explain who can. Here was a model wife, devoted to a worthy spouse, and she could hurl secret anathemas at his head, whereas for the same high misdemeanor committed ten minutes later, she had nothing but kisses and smiles for the two great, sprouting, awkward schoolboys.

She even felt it fortunate that she had put on her bonnet when she did. It was so kind of dear Harry and Charlie to have come all the way across the park on purpose to fetch her. How should they suppose she had anything to say to Tom which they might not hear?

With one on each side, and Tom piloting cheerily in front, she was bustling along; and thereafter spent the rest of the morning, as we have said, ranging round and round her narrow beat, and only thankful to be allowed to abide therein, having at last been able to persuade her darlings that much as she felt indebted to them for the chair proposition, and absolutely as she trusted in their powers, her foolish fancy made her somehow happier upon *terra firma*.

CHAPTER VIII.

FROZEN PONDS.

BUT if the hapless chaperon were thus immolated on the altar of the ice-god, the rest had a merry time of it.

It had not escaped Mrs. Lytton's eye that, on her first arrival upon the scene, the two on whom her thoughts were chiefly bent were in close proximity,—Mr. Stafford was busily adjusting afresh the skate straps of her eldest niece—and subsequently she had the satisfaction of perceiving that he was at least as much in Ida's company as in that of anyone else. More could not honestly be said.

Keen skaters revelling in a stretch of ice, clear as crystal, and untouched by the foot of man or beast, are in the mood for skating, not flirting; and to fly and wheel, to laugh and shout, to grow rosy and out of breath and pull up only to exchange joyous greetings with

others equally panting and radiant, form the business of the moment. Gaiety, merriment, mirth is the order of the day.

Maurice Stafford, whose swift evolutions left behind all previous experience on the part of the others present, was apparently giving himself up to the enjoyment of the passing hour. His round face glowed with good-humour. He laughed back to the applauding circle, and merrily vied with himself as it were in the performance of fresh feats, whilst they gathered round, and the bolder among them essayed to imitate. A sort of freemasonry of jollity seemed to animate every breast, and even the poor watcher on the bank strove to warm herself at the universal flame.

“It does one good to see the dear children,” murmured she, with an involuntary shiver. “Such an excellent amusement! So healthy! Dear Ida never looked better! Scarlet suits her; and really how well Tom has managed after all! To get his uncle and me down just when the *dénouement* may be expected to take place, and to hit off the dear boys’ extra holidays too! So lucky to have this place to take

them to when they had to be sent home a week before their usual time. Now if Tom and Ida wish it, we could easily stop on here over Christmas, or even longer. We might even stay to the end of the holidays. Of course if this engagement comes off, there would be a reason for doing so; otherwise it would be a little awkward for Harry and Charlie to go back to school from here. Duckhill is rather a back-of-beyond place,——”

Her cogitations were interrupted by a shout from the ice. Mr. Stafford had succeeded in teaching Charlie one of his own figures, and Charlie was wildly signalling to his mother to witness his exhibition of it. Stafford was also calling to her. It needed but this touch to put the finish to the parent's delighted approval of the latter. “He must be a *very* nice man,” said she to herself.

Presently down came her husband from the house. He had found the house lonely. Not a sound had reached his ears since he was left solitary in it. He was tired of his book and of his own company, and the sight of a moving crowd—it is strange how few figures are re-

quired to make up a crowd when forming the central objects of a snowy landscape—the cheery sight had proved in the end irresistible. With his cap turned down over his ears, and his thick coat well buttoned up, he was now seen tramping over the snow.

“That’s right, John.” Mrs. Lytton was herself again,—almost anyone to share her dreary watch would have been welcome, and she was really glad to see John this time,—“that’s right. It is far too fine to be wasting time indoors.” Her feet were cold as stones, and she had been aimlessly up and down the track a hundred times, but she still tried to think she was taking advantage of the beautiful morning. “Here is a nice path that Tom has had cleared,” proceeded the speaker cheerfully.

“One need not go on the ice at all——”

“—Not go on the ice!” John burst out laughing. “Not go on the ice!” cried he. “Good Lord! What are you doing here, then? Do you mean to say,” fumbling down the bank as fast as he could get, “do you mean to say you have been pottering up there—here, come down—here’s my hand”—he was

now safely established after a stagger or two—"here, Tom--here—oh, Mr. Stafford, it's you? Will you kindly give my wife your hand? Hoots, nonsense!" as she drew back. "What are you afraid of? The ice is strong enough. If it will bear me, it will bear you. Come along——"

"—Pray come, Mrs. Lytton," cried Maurice persuasively, and as he spoke he ran up the bank sideways in his skates. "I have not bothered you before," he went on, "because I thought you would like to grow accustomed to the look of the ice first; but now if you will let me guide you down, I give you my word I won't let you fall, and you will enjoy yourself ever so much more, down among us all, than up here by yourself."

"Do come, auntie," cried Ida's ringing voice behind him.

"You can't refuse Miss Barnet and me, conjointly," said Maurice, turning his head round. Something in his voice, and still more in his look, gave to the words a significance they had not otherwise possessed. Surely they were simple words enough, but they were not simple

as Maurice Stafford spoke them. Just as an artful *chef* will compound a thrilling dish out of the most ordinary ingredients, so will a cunning lover turn every trifle to account. A flush on the girl's fair cheek betrayed that the shot had told. Maurice had once or twice of late said such things, things which if anyone else had ventured upon he would have known better than to repeat the offence. But this guest was not as other guests. He had stuck by the outraged, humiliated, miserable little quartette in their need. He had cheered away their gloom, and thrown to the winds their heart-burnings. He had become privileged.

Jenny and Louie, as we know, had learned to suspect that Ida would give way if they could back a request with "Maurice sent us to ask you." Tom found that he might quote Mr. Stafford without having his quotations snapped at and disposed of. It must be confessed that Ida was disposed to snap when she did not approve of Tom's authority. Her nature was freer, more independent than his; and though their tempers suited, and their aims in life were identical, the sister would occa-

sionally rely entirely on her own judgment, when Tom would seek General Thistleblow. But now both were of one mind. Tom openly hung upon Stafford's lips; Ida's meek subservience betrayed his still more complete dominion.

But we digress. We left Mrs. Lytton halting irresolute on the brink of the ice, one skater by her side importuning her to descend, the other from below seconding his entreaties. What could the good creature do but yield? She said afterwards that she knew beforehand she must fall. Stafford said she put her foot into a rabbit hole. Certain it was, that ere any one could intervene, or indeed see what had happened or was likely to happen, the victim of complaisance, who was stout and somewhat heavy, was on her knees plunging downwards; Stafford, who had been dragged down by her, was on his back, likewise slipping rapidly; and Ida, who had advanced to the edge in order to facilitate the descent, was knocked sharply over, and lay upon the ice, her temples bathed in blood. Her head had struck against the sharp edge of the skate above.

Had it not been for the cap of thick tweed which had been donned that morning at the bidding of her new master, the cut must have been much more serious ; as it was, the brow had merely been grazed, and the cheek below laid open for about an inch. Ida indeed found the accident only laughable, strove to laugh, and—found the accents cleave to her tongue, and the faces around her grow dim.

“ Water ! ” cried a voice in her ear, and the voice seemed to surge and thunder like a thousand voices. Then all was still. She fainted away.

We will pass over the scene of consternation and confusion which ensued. Water, which was eagerly demanded on all sides, was of course the very last thing to be obtained when every puddle on the grass was frozen ; and before even an opening at the edge of the ice could be effected, some minutes of torturing suspense had to be undergone, since no one could say how deeply the cut had penetrated, nor whether the swoon was due to the severity of the injuries sustained or to a lesser cause.

In the tumult it escaped remark that Stafford, who had been the first to raise the unconscious form from the ice, still held it in his arms, and strove to quench the stream which flowed from the cut by the pressure of Ida's own little gossamer handkerchief, his face set as a flint, his brows heavily drawn together. The part should hardly have been taken by a stranger, and, although to this one the accident was due, he might have been relieved had any one—Tom, for instance—thought of relieving him. Tom, however, was thinking of nothing less. The moment his sister opened her eyes, and sighed with a consciousness of returning life, Tom's own knees began to tremble ominously. He had been mortally frightened; he had never in his life seen any one faint, and he was an attached brother. Dash it all! He could not stand upright.

“Look out there! He's going too,” cried Stafford, chancing to glance round; and, to his intense disgust, poor Tom found himself the next minute being gently escorted towards a strip of carpet on duty for a seat, while a brandy flask was held to his lips. His uncle John had

produced the flask, and Ida had already had the benefit of it. All the mortification which had gone before was nothing to the shame of this. Very anger pulled the boy round. That he, a man, one-and-twenty years of age, should go off like a silly girl, and go off too without the excuse of a fall or a blow!

“Pooh! That’s nothing,” said Stafford, subsequently. “Lots of young fellows do it. On a hot day I have seen them fall forward on parade like a row of ninepins. And it’s a great deal worse seeing some one else hurt than being knocked over yourself, especially when it’s some one you—you care about. I don’t wonder at you, Tom, not in the very least. I assure you, I—between you and me—I felt uncommonly queer myself.”

“No? You didn’t?”

“I did, upon my word. You see it was the sharp edge of my skate she struck against. I was slipping down the bank—your aunt dragged me down in her fall—between us we bowled over your sister—and it might have been a long way worse than it was, all things considered. But I got an awful fright when

she fainted. The cut was nastily near a very bad place."

"I know," said Tom, in rather a sick voice, "the temple."

Maurice nodded. "I once saw that done," he muttered to himself.

"Did you?" interrogatively.

"Yes. It was a bad business. We'll not talk of it. Your sister is all right anyway. Only I don't wonder you were upset by the sight. You knew—as I did—what a near thing it was."

"There he is again! Such a *comforting* fellow!" A minute before, the sorely humiliated youth had scarcely cared to look the older man in the face, now every sting which mortification had inflicted was withdrawn. Tom found himself quite ready for his luncheon, quite hungry for a good cut of the game pie which had been concocted out of sundry windfalls which had fallen to his gun since shooting again became a possibility, and quite able to play the host, with carving knife and fork uplifted.

"I hope we shall have Ida down at dinner," he observed cheerily, "but you must take her

place till then, if you please, aunt Bess, and we will do as well as we can without her. Which of you are going to skate again in the afternoon? You boys, I know. But what do you say, Maud and Caroline!"—to some cousins of his own age, whose mother was the aunt Tibbie already referred to in these pages.

The young ladies expressed their willingness to resume their skates. The afternoon was clear, and they were not too tired. It would be a shame to be content with only half a day. The speaker, Caroline, a fresh colored damsel, without any pretensions to beauty, further added that she hoped and proposed to skate every day and all day long while there was frost in the air and ice on the pond, a sentiment which met with general approval.

"I only wish we could," subjoined one small, anxious voice.

"And why can't you?" was demanded of little Louie, to whom the sigh was traced.

"Lessons," promptly.

"Lessons? Oh. Haven't your holidays begun yet?" inquired her uncle. "Here are Harry and Charlie holiday making. To be

sure, they came back a week too soon because of the measles or something. Why didn't you get up a measles at your place too?"

"There is no one but us to get it up, uncle Jack."

"No one but you? Are you not at school, then?"

"We are not at school," explained Jenny, patronisingly. "We do lessons at the vicarage, and Mr. Stafford drives us there and back in the snow-plough every morning."

Mr. Stafford drives us! Even Mr. Stafford felt uncomfortable. The remark was true enough; for the past three mornings he had steadily escorted the vicarage pupils to and fro on the little snow-plough, and only the Saturday holiday had released him and them on the present occasion. But there was a breadth and comprehensiveness about the calm assertion which was somewhat embarrassing. It seemed to embrace the past, present, and future tenses all at once. "Mr. Stafford drives us" inferred that Mr. Stafford had been driving for an indefinite bygone period, and would continue to do so with an equally unlimited range in front.

Children are apt to make such assertions. Their horizons are narrow, and they become so soon acclimatised to any novel state of affairs, that they fail to realise it as either new, or temporary. How often does one hear "We always do this, or that," from rosy mouths, which scarcely know what the word "always" means! Then it becomes difficult to set such small blunders right, for they will demand chapter and verse which it is often not worth while giving, and fight every inch of the ground until an impression is left in their favour by the very pains which has to be taken to get rid of it.

In the present case both Jenny's brother and his guest were aware of a certain silence which fell upon the party, consequent upon the little girl's speech.

Aunt Bess looked "Oho?" Maud and Caroline glanced at each other; their mother's eyes twinkled over the glass of sherry she was sipping; and only uncle Jack munched away as usual.

"Lessons at the vicarage, eh?" quoth he, jocularly. "'Pon my word that's a nice, easy

way of being schooled. Haven't you so much as a governess, then? What do you do all the rest of the time? Run wild, eh?"

"We do our preparation," retorted Jenny, scornfully. "We don't need a *governess* to help us to do it!" emphasising the words with the grudge implanted by bitter memories. "And we don't 'run wild' one bit more than we did when aunt Joanna was alive, and we had Mademoiselle with us all day long. Ida wouldn't let us 'run wild' if we tried. She——"

"Lets you drive about on snow-ploughs, eh?"

"We have to get to the vicarage, somehow, uncle Jack. And it is such fun—Mr. Stafford drives us——"

("Oh, blow!" ejaculated Stafford, internally.) He had thought they were off the dangerous ground, and had been blessing his own self-control, and the old gentleman's obtuseness for thus giving the subject the slip. To have it now cropping up again! He must take notice this time.

"We had a plough made on Tuesday, and they elected me charioteer for the nonce," he

turned to his next-door neighbour, speaking so as to be heard by all. "I daresay one of the boys will like to succeed to the post——"

"Yes, rather," from Harry, who was over the way.

"It was not bad fun," continued Maurice, by his air transferring the privilege. "It really wasn't. The little pony goes awfully well. Only you must take care at the start. Just for the first few steps. He is all right for the rest of the time."

As he spoke a pair of earnest eyes regarded him, "Aren't you going to drive us at all, never again, then?" said little Louie. Her grammar was useful; it afforded an occasion for a laugh, under cover of which the person appealed to could reply, "You would rather have one of the boys, wouldn't you?" and 'twixt banter and rejoinder the subject died away of itself.

In his own mind Mr. Stafford saw himself some one else's charioteer, presently. The pretty sleigh was in good working order, and what better carriage could there be for an invalid?

At the very same moment General Thistleblow, communing with himself in the great hall of his club, was wondering why the devil Tom Barnet didn't send those woodcock, and musing how he should administer the cold *douche* he had in store for Master Tom, supposing the woodcock were not to appear at all.

CHAPTER IX.

PUTTING ON A GAME-BAG.

“WHAT do you think about it?” said Maud to Caroline, directly the two were alone together.

“Oh, I think it will do very well.” Her sister had already considered and decided upon the point. “He is not handsome,” she observed, however.

“Oh, no.”

“At first I thought him almost ugly—or at any rate, uninteresting—but I don’t think him uninteresting now. And how beautifully he skates. We must practise that circle this afternoon, Maud. As the men will be out shooting, there will be no one to see us, and we ought to be able to do it, if we have the whole afternoon’s practice by ourselves.”

“You may. I don’t expect I shall.” Maud was not so enthusiastic. “I wonder when it

will come off!" she added, her mind running more upon bridesmaids' dresses than the outside edge.

"Yes, indeed, so do I. If Ida were like other girls, I should soon have it out of her; but she and Tom are such queer, formal creatures. She has never let fall the slightest hint, and yet I am sure," pausing to consider, "yes, I am sure there *is* something to hint about, aren't you? It is Ida he is here for, isn't it? I wish she would say something. I will go to her boudoir and sit with her, after we come in; perhaps she will let me have tea there; she is to stay quiet for this afternoon, you know; and then I will see what I can do. Now be quick; the boys are waiting, and I am all ready."

"Are Jenny and Louie coming too?"

"Of course."

"Then why can't we find out from them about Mr. Stafford?"

"Try," said Caroline, grimly. Already she had herself tried.

"Is it no good?"

"Either they don't know anything, or they

have been drilled into not saying anything. If the last, I never met such close little creatures. I walked to the ponds with Jenny, and began carelessly—‘How nice Mr. Stafford is! Have you known him long?’ What do you think she answered? Simply this: ‘I don’t know about the others. Louie and I have only known him since he came here.’ Well, that told me nothing, of course; so then I tried this—I said, ‘He has been here a long time, hasn’t he?’ As demurely as possible, she replied, ‘He came to shoot.’ As if coming to shoot entailed a residence of weeks in the house! ‘Well,’ I said, ‘I hope he will stay, as he is here, for he seems so good-humoured and jolly; just the right sort of man to have in a country house!’ And not one single word did she say in reply! I couldn’t go on after that, you know; it would have seemed as if I were looking after him for myself.”

“Did you see his face at the accident?”

“I did not think much of that. Anyone would have been in a fright, when it was his skate that cut her head.”

“Fancy Tom’s turning sick!”

“Oh, Tom! Tom’s only a boy,” rejoined her sister, contemptuously. “Boys of that age faint when they are vaccinated, or see anyone else vaccinated! They *do*; I know. Tom thinks he is fearfully old and grand—but he is really a very mild youth. It makes me laugh to see his anxious face going about. He is so dreadfully in earnest over every trifle; and when anything goes wrong, he looks as if the world were coming to an end! If any real evil were to befall one of them, I verily believe it would break poor Tom’s heart.”

The last words were spoken as the sisters emerged from their bedroom, and the speaker had to lower her voice in order not to be overheard.

In the large square hall below, there were several people assembled. Tom and Maurice Stafford were starting for the woods; Mrs. Lytton was luxuriously watching their equipment, and toasting her toes at the huge furnace which warmed the hall; and the boys were hovering round, fingering and inquiring. Jenny and Louie were not, however, visible.

“They are in their schoolroom,” explained

Tom, in answer to his cousins' interrogation. "Saturday is a holiday, so they are not at work there, and I believe they are all ready to go off with you as soon as they are called; but we don't allow them to be hanging about downstairs."

"Perhaps they are with Ida?" suggested Maud Western.

Maurice Stafford looked up quickly.

"Oh, I don't suppose so," said Tom. "The schoolroom is their place after luncheon, until they are called. Are you ready, Maurice? We may as well be off now."

"One moment," said Maurice. "This—ah—strap is not quite tight enough. I think you are right, Miss Western," in an undertone, "Jenny ran along to her sister's room just now. She will be back immediately. Bother this strap—I must bore a new hole—your knife, Tom—shan't keep you a second." A flying step was heard on the staircase. "I thought so, here she comes." The last words being uttered in the same subdued aside, which was only for the ear of the nearest person. Then the speaker glanced upwards.

It was obvious that his messenger—if Jenny were a messenger—had not expected to find so many in the hall on her return from the embassy, and on perceiving who were present in addition to her brother and Maurice, her step slackened, till finally she descended the last few steps of the broad, old-fashioned staircase, dropping from one to the other, as though about to come to a standstill on each.

“There’s your knife, Tom,” said Maurice, loudly. The next moment, with a sudden hasty diligence which had the effect of scattering the group to right and left, he was pressing swiftly by the new arrival who still stood undecided at the bottom of the staircase.

“Come along, Tom. Jenny, will you sling on this bag for me?”

He inclined his head towards Jenny as he spoke. She raised her arms and the game-bag was dropped over it. The two heads were very near together, and something—but no other person present could hear what—certainly did pass between the two.

It might have been a mere remark, or interrogation on his part, and rejoinder on hers. It

might have related solely to the service she was rendering him. On the other hand, it might have been a sovereign's demand of his envoy how she had sped upon a mission, and the envoy's laying of her report at her master's feet.

Maud Western, who could see, though she could not hear, inclined to think it was the last.

"He did it beautifully—just beautifully," cried the little ambassadress, however, to herself. "Nobody could ever have guessed. And I didn't know how I was ever to get at him with all those heaps of people standing by, and uncle Jack who always will talk to me whenever I go near, as if on purpose to draw Tom's attention, so that Tom begins at once with his 'Why are you not in the school-room?' As if I'm not in the schoolroom for *hours*—as if I'm not *always* in the schoolroom whenever I am not out of it! Maurice is the only person that ever seems to think Louie and I shouldn't be in the schoolroom all day long. And I was determined to get at him—determined. Tom couldn't stop that. I do hope Tom won't stop his going. But there, I don't

suppose Maurice would let him stop it," and thus pondering and cogitating, the little girl trotted along by the side of the skaters, her mind running as fast as her feet, and the blood in her veins dancing with excitement.

She had been sent up to Ida—sent, as instinct told her, with a secret message—for which a secret answer was desired.

Not a syllable had been breathed regarding this secrecy. Maurice had not even taken her apart, or dropped the casual observation "Don't say anything about it:" but he had by apparent chance found his way to the far-away schoolroom, the despised haunt of the schoolroom pair, and by real good luck found the elder of the pair, and her own especial friend, alone therein.

Then this had followed: "Jenny, you're going skating this afternoon?"

"Yes."

"All of you?"

"Yes, all of us."

"And your uncle Jack, and aunt Bess, and your other aunt are going to drive in the sleigh?"

"Yes. It is ordered round at three o'clock. Uncle Jack is to drive."

"Your sister Ida will be all alone?"

Jenny nodded.

"Don't you think she would like to have some one go in and sit with her?"

Jenny smiled.

"But you see Tom and I are going off shooting."

Jenny was all attention.

"You ask your sister this," said Maurice, drawing nearer, "mind you say these very words. Ask her from me, whether, if I should come in from shooting presently, while the rest are out of doors, she would let me come and see her in the boudoir? I say," as the little girl was about to start on the instant, "don't—don't startle her, you know. Just take your own time, and do it quietly—not before other people."

"Oh, there's no one with her."

"All right. Go when there's no one with her, and you can just tell me *quietly* too, you know. Other people are only bothers, aren't they? They don't understand about things.

But you understand, don't you? Well, you just manage it and—and I can wait here till you come back."

But he had not been able to wait there till she came back.

Tom had missed his fellow-sportsman, and begun to look for him and to shout for him, long before the faithful little girl had accomplished her task, so that he had been reluctantly compelled to quit his stronghold and come forth, lest suspicion should be awakened, and curiosity set afoot. He had, however, trusted Jenny.

Jenny's face had crimsoned and her eyes had lighted up while he spoke; she had been so proud of the trust reposed in her, and so impressed with the gravity of her mission, that intelligence had beamed in every feature, and Maurice had felt confident that, whatever happened, she would not betray him.

In consequence he had joined Tom in the hall, secure of being found there, and of finding some means of communicating with his accomplice. Her slower step and wistful perplexity at sight of his companions was exactly what he

had anticipated, and we know how he contrived to break through the barricade surrounding him and obtain her ear.

In the moment of bending his head to receive the large leathern game-bag, which he had put into the quickly-comprehending Jenny's hands, he murmured, "Will she see me?" and the answer he received was conveyed in the single word "Yes."

Thus Miss Western was not at fault in considering that a transaction of some importance took place beneath her very nose, though inaudible to her ear, before she set forth on her skating expedition.

CHAPTER X.

A SPORTSMAN'S TRICK.

BRILLIANT winter mornings have an ugly trick of turning into dull and misty afternoons, and though the various parties at Duckhill Manor were not prevented from setting forth on their several expeditions, the glory of the day had departed ere the sun had begun to decline, and nothing but shooting, skating, or sleighing would have kept anybody out of doors after three o'clock.

But what cannot people put up with who are healthy, good-humoured, and on pleasure bent? What cannot even women do, who make up their minds to do it?

Had the peevish fine ladies, Tom Barnet's first guests, been still at Duckhill, scarce a foot indeed would have stirred out of doors after the plenteous luncheon which followed the efforts of the morning. Mrs. Jessop would have

retired to her bedroom sofa; Lady Sophia Clarke to the writing-table; and the rest to fancy-work and novelettes; but the aunt Bess, and aunt Tibbie who now set forth, gallantly escorted by uncle Jack, in the cosy little sleigh, were of stouter stuff; while Maud and Caroline were, as we know, impervious to weather, and as keen on outdoor exercise as a couple of spaniels.

“They are all right enough,” ruminated Maurice Stafford. “Even if those girls talk of coming in—which they won’t—Jenny will take care they do nothing of the kind. It was a happy thought to enlist her on my side. The old ladies are disposed of famously,”—he had seen the sleigh traversing a piece of open ground shortly before—“and not a soul has been left behind. Now to effect my own escape.”

He took out his watch. It was half-past three. The driving-party must have been late in setting off, since they could not have taken half an hour in reaching the spot they were at, when sighted. All the better—they would certainly not be in for another hour. The field

would be clear for full three-quarters of an hour after he should have got home, after which—oh, after which—he laughed. He would not trouble about that “after which.” He would leave it to take care of itself. So far, luck, or fate, or Providence, had provided for him; and with the present alone he had to do.

Tom was on in front. Should he say anything to Tom? Somehow he had a great dislike to saying anything. Tom was not the sort of man to whom certain things come easy to say. There was a chain armour of solemn innocence about Tom Barnet which was well enough in its way, but formed a barrier betwixt him and other young men of his age, even as it irritated, and, after a fashion, humiliated his elders.

“He is so infernally pompous,” old Thistleblow used to say.

Perhaps he was a little pompous; perhaps he was a little stiff and rigid and dictatorial. Certainly neither his sympathies nor his emotions lay on the surface, and even when secure of approval it was formidable to approach him with confidence.

“Oh, I can’t bother about Tom,” Maurice came to a conclusion, hastily. “I must just have a headache, or something. I have a bit of a headache from the fright this morning. If he kicks up a row, I can speak out; but if he let’s me slip off quietly, I will—— Hullo! Tom!”

Tom turned round.

“Sh!” he whispered. “’Ware. Duck!”

“I’m going to leave them to you,” whispered Maurice back. “I—fact is—I can’t go on. Beastly headache. Never mind—nothing to mind about,” all in the same undertone. “You go on; I’ll turn back. I know my way; it’s just down here, and over that field. Don’t bother about me—it’s all right. Ta-ta.” And before his companion could recover from his astonishment, the speaker had put some paces between the two, and was clearing the ground homewards at as rapid a rate as the broken, snowy track permitted.

Tom stood still, staring; rubbed his eyes, and stared again. Then a slow smile crept over his face. He began to comprehend.

“But he will never see her. She is not

down," he muttered to himself. "If she had only known about it, and got down to the drawing-room! She could have done it perfectly, if we had had the least idea; she was not so bad but that it could have been managed. Now he will have given up his shooting all for nothing. I had better call him back." He drew breath for a shout, then let it die away unuttered, "I am not supposed to know what he has gone for; I had forgotten that. Stupid fellow! If he had only had it out with me, I could have told him there was no earthly use in trying to see Ida this afternoon. Of course he *may* manage it, if he likes to send up to her, and she likes to come down to him——," then suddenly he stopped short. "By Jove!—what a fool I am!" A vision of Maurice's reluctance to start earlier in the afternoon, and a recollection that he had wondered whether his fellow-sportsman really wished to shoot, or whether he were not lingering out of disinclination, flashed upon his mind. He remembered that Maurice had not jumped at the idea of shooting. At the time, he had, indeed, when begged to say if he preferred the

ice, given his vote for the woods ; but, and all at once, it was borne in upon the elder brother's mind, that if his guest had been absolutely free to decide, he would have chosen neither ; he would have preferred another quest.

And Jenny, too ? He had seen Jenny come flying down from Ida's room, and whisper something in Maurice's ear. At the time he had thought nothing of it, nay, one might almost say he had seen nothing of it. But there are sights which, like the photographic plate, are invisible at first, to become gradually developed, as it were, to the inward eye ; and this was one of them.

“By Jove ! I am a fool !” reiterated Tom, internally. “There is something up. Well, now, had I better be out of the way, or had I not ? I'm not wanted, of course ; but can they manage without me ? How if those others go in ? As likely as not they will want to go in, just because they are particularly desired to keep out. Those Western girls will turn cold, or something ; or uncle Jack will funk the driving and bring the sleigh back, if he has not done it already,”—he had not seen the sleigh

go by when Maurice did—"well, now, what am I to do?" he cogitated. "If I stay out I shall get some cocks, that's a fact; but if they go and botch matters at home it won't do. I had better let the cocks slide. I know what will put it straight. I'll go round by the village, and bring up the letter-bag. That will be an excuse: and I do expect letters, and we might have to answer them; so I can say I went to bring them early. It's rather a pity," and he looked wistfully round.

The afternoon was not brilliant, as we have said, but it was eminently workmanlike. It meant good luck, and a good bag.

Tom had inherited enough of his father's tastes to make him appreciate such an afternoon, and if he had ever yet been disposed to be vexed with Maurice Stafford it was in the present instance, ~~for~~ spoiling such a golden opportunity. If it had been anyone but Maurice, he would have been affronted and indignant; as it was, he felt rueful. It was a pity, he thought, a monstrous pity. To be sure, men in love were not to be put on the same level as other men; they were, in a manner, not ac-

countable ; allowances must be made for them—but, all the same, if Maurice could only have put off till the next day, Sunday—Sunday would have been the best day in all the week for a proposal to have come off.

He presumed it was a proposal which Maurice was about to make. Ida was certainly warranted in expecting one ; they were all so warranted. Everything had tended in that direction. Discretion had been the order of the day—but they were not blind. He and Ida knew all about such things. The little ones, of course, knew nothing, and suspected nothing—that was as it should be.

But his good aunt Bess had seen the whole in the twinkling of an eye ; and, perhaps, had there been another minute's confidence between him and her, he might have been led into saying something which, on the whole, he was now glad he had not said. If it should turn out that there was something real and tangible to announce on the return of his aunt from her drive, it would be infinitely better in every way. He should be spared advice and proffers of assistance—and such advice and such prof-

fers were precisely what our very young man most disliked.

“If I could announce the engagement, what a score it would be!” he now exclaimed. He was always wanting to “score.” The shooting party had not been a “score;” but if Maurice Stafford should prove to be one, he felt he could forgive the shooting party.

Meantime, Maurice made his way over the rough ground, having first carefully taken out his cartridges and uncocked his gun;—and someone from an upper window watched him coming.

Ida had forgotten that she was an invalid—forgotten that she had been left alone in her little boudoir to rest and sleep—forgotten altogether that she should have been lying among the sofa-pillows in her cosy dressing-gown, as aunt Bess had left her, directly aunt Bess left the house. Long before aunt Bess had bestowed her farewell kiss, the ungrateful niece had been fretting with impatience. The sleigh had been ordered for three, and the clocks all round had struck three fully five minutes before her aunt had entered. Up to that time

Ida had endured with what grace she might, but every moment after three meant a loss of time.

Mrs. Lytton's tender little inquiries and ministrations, her fussing hither and thither, her settling of the warm shawl over her dear Ida's feet, her building-up of the fire and drawing-down of the blinds—all so kindly meant—were so many offences. At length, "Oh, pray leave the blinds up, dear auntie," had burst forth with a petulance which rather surprised the self-appointed nurse.

"Poor dear! she is irritable—her nerves have been upset," murmured she. Then aloud, "Well, good-bye, dear child, and do try to get a little sleep; it will do you so much good. The house is quite quiet; no one but the servants in it. But I have told them to listen carefully for your bell. Oh, dear; you will have to get up to reach the bell-rope—that is a pity! Now, could we not contrive a cord?" cogitating. "I have often seen a cord in a sick-room——"

"But this is not a sick-room, aunt Bess! Pray don't trouble; pray don't stay any longer;

I can get up and ring the bell, perfectly, if I want to ring it. Uncle Jack is waiting, I am sure," with a restive movement.

"It seems so selfish to leave you lying here."

"Not the least selfish. You know I am told to be quiet."

"So you are; and you look very comfortable," glancing round. "You are sure there is nothing else I can do, no little comfort——"

"Quite—quite sure."

"Then I will go," reluctantly. "We shall not be gone long."

"Oh, please, aunt Bess," in her earnestness Ida rose upon her elbow; "please be as long as ever you like—as long as ever you can. I will not have you coming back because of me. Uncle Jack has been told where to drive and you must," with rising emphasis, "leave it to him. Promise me you will. Nothing would vex me more than your cutting short your drive; and, indeed, you know," blushing, for Ida was not used to strategy, "you know I was to be kept quiet, so that the longer you are away the better for me. The doctor said if I

felt quite rested by to-night, I might come down to dinner. I do want to come down to dinner."

"Certainly. To be sure. We all want that," her aunt beamed.

"Then good-bye, and do stay out a long, long time," whispered Ida, her voice suddenly fading into softness. "Good-bye!" and she held up her face for a kiss. "Good-bye."

"God bless you, dear child." ("It was so sweet to hear her say 'Good-bye' like that," mused the fond relation with moist eyes. "One forgets all dear Ida's little asperities the moment they are past. She will grow out of them, and at heart she is the same affectionate——")—"Yes, yes, coming, my dear, coming," in response to loud demands from without. "Coming, coming, coming," looking back to nod, and smile, and wave her hand once more. "Coming, coming, coming," and the door of the boudoir closed at last.

Ida bounded from the sofa and kicked the shawl on to the floor.

"I don't care whether it is safe or not," she exclaimed. "I must go and get ready, or he

may be back before I have got on my things. Oh, my head is really a little dizzy," dropping it on her hand. "Perhaps I had better not dress my hair again. But this old dressing-gown must disappear, and if I put on my red cloth it may do for the evening; at least, it may pass as having been put on for the evening—but they don't catch me sitting down to dinner in it, all the same! Now then," and she slipped noiselessly over the carpet, and into her own room which was on the other side of the landing.

In ten minutes all traces of invalid attire had disappeared, and the figure which sat in the boudoir window watching for Maurice Stafford, was the one which ordinarily met his view when admitted to that calm retreat.

Twice of late he had been admitted there. He had found out whither his companion on the snow-car was wont to retreat after the "ride" was over—Ida had had her "ride" in the afternoons—and had on one occasion followed her abstractedly up the staircase and along the gallery, talking all the time.

At the door of the boudoir they had both

stood still. But the door was open, and Maurice had looked absently inside.

“Is this your sanctum? May I come in?” he had inquired, as though he might have been saying, “Is this your door-mat? May I tread upon it?” It would have been absurd to refuse permission.

The next day, perceiving there was to be a repetition of the scene, Ida had called her little sisters to her, and Louie had come, but Jenny’s “preparation” had not been complete. Still, even little Louie had been a third person, and Ida—poor, proud, prudent Ida—had felt the need of a third person.

“If my mother had been alive I should not have been forced to think of this,” she had told herself; “but I have only Tom to fall back upon, and Tom—Tom did not know about yesterday.”

She could not tell him; but she had resolved to guard against such another hour as that which Maurice, the thief, had stolen so cleverly; and the result had been Louie’s chaperonage.

Now, however, even Louie was to be dis-

pensed with. A man can hardly be expected to offer his heart and hand to the woman of his choice in the presence of another—child though that other be—and the nature of the message which was delivered almost into her sister's ear by the sympathetic and deeply exulting Jenny on the afternoon in question, if it meant anything, meant a crisis.

It had thrilled through every vein of the hearer like an electric shock. For a few seconds Ida had been too deeply startled to speak—almost to breathe; then she made the other repeat over and over what had transpired, regardless of what Jenny might think, in her hot and cold anxiety to know the exact truth, its limits and its possibilities—and in reply had at length burdened the eager messenger, who was impatient to be off, with the single monosyllable which was all sufficient.

And now she sat watching and quaking. There he was! A dark figure looming large through the frosty fog. He was coming from the very point she expected. She had felt sure he would come from that point. He must have broken off from Tom on the marshy ground at

the head of the stream, just where snipe and woodcock and wild duck were most plentiful.

“Poor Tom wouldn’t like it,” said Ida, with a smile.

It pleased her to think that Maurice had chosen the favourite piece of sporting ground for turning his back upon the feathered prey ; and it wiped out the remembrance of his previous offence in connection with the first snow ride, and seemed a sort of expiation of that crime. He had put all aside to come to her now.

And how fast he was coming !

He must not, however, find her at the window ; and accordingly she withdrew behind the curtain, leaving a tiny peephole whence still to see without being seen.

Now he was at the white gate !

The gate had a sharp click as it swung to, and as the click sounded Ida drew back still further. The room was radiant with fire-light, and who could tell whether she might not be detected somehow and somewhere if she remained within the range of observation ?

She could not see, but she could listen.

The boudoir was on the second floor of a

wing whose storeys were lower than those of the main building. Maurice's tread on the frozen gravel from which the snow had been swept, sounded loud and distinct as he tramped past, and the quick ears of the watcher above could even detect that he halted at one of the side entrances to the house, instead of going in by the front door—the reason for doing which she divined at once.

“His boots are dirty and wet,” she said; “and he thinks he will come in by the back hall, and up the back staircase. He forgets, however, that he will have to take his gun along.”

It was a strict rule of the house that guns were to be left in the gun-room, and Maurice had hitherto been careful to obey all rules. Was he about to transgress on the present occasion? She glided to the door of the boudoir, and slipped it ajar; but there was no echo of clamped boots upon the stone floor of the hall.

Neither did the swing-door fly back. Its well-known whistling creak could penetrate anywhere if stirred up by a passer through.

Instead, someone was quickly ascending. In a terrible fright poor Ida fled back to her sofa, feeling that she had never had a narrower escape in her life.

The next minute she was laughing at herself.

Her own maid, Flowers, was tapping at the door, and in Flowers' hand was the old-fashioned leathern letter-bag still in vogue at Duckhill Manor. All at once it became clear that the bearer of this had been mistaken for the person expected by a foolish girl whose eyes had been directed by her heart.

Yet she could hardly blame herself. The afternoon letters were rarely delivered before four at the earliest, often not till five o'clock; how came they to be up so early to-day?

"The bag was sent up from the post-office without Thomas going to fetch it, miss," explained Flowers. "Mrs. Bowdler asked her baker—though he's not our baker,"—in parenthesis—"to give it a lift, and he just left his cart at the turn of the road and ran across with it himself. A very civil man is Mr. Puddiefat, and always ready to oblige."

Ida took the bag.

“Mr. Puddiefat!” echoed she to herself. “And so it was only *you*, Mr. Puddiefat! Did anyone ever hear such a name?” pettishly, for it was vexing to have had all her heart-beatings for nothing. “Who would ever have supposed the letter-bag would come that way, and come at this hour? Who wants the letter-bag now?”

From force of habit, however, she took the key from her girdle, and the very first envelope which made its appearance was directed to herself.

The handwriting was bold and determined, and Ida knew whose it was; she had seen it several times of late. Usually, moreover, it had been beheld with some interest, as being likely to convey intelligence of importance, which up to a certain date it had certainly done—but since the collapse of the shooting party no one had cared much to hear from Lady Sophia Clarke; and neither had Lady Sophia cared to write.

What could she be writing about now?

“I may as well open it,” said Ida, idly;

“there are no others for me,” turning over the pile upon her lap. “It will look better for him to find me busy. I can be sitting here in the window to make the most of the light, now that it has turned into such a dark afternoon. He may come any minute, now. Well, what says Lady Sophia?” and she opened Lady Sophia’s letter with the indifference of a babe smiling down into the gulf of Fate.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CONTENTS OF THE POST-BAG.

LADY SOPHIA CLARKE was one of those women who conceive themselves born to set straight the affairs of the world.

From earliest years she had loved to know everything, and to decide upon everything that went on around her. No change could be made, no servant dismissed in her father's household, without the whole state of the case having to be made known to the inquisitive child or, as years passed, to the authoritative young lady. The family, from its head downwards, had almost openly rejoiced in their freedom consequent upon her marriage; and it had been presumed that the domineering talents which had made her ladyship a bugbear and a nuisance so far, would develop into virtues when transferred to a sphere which should be legitimately her own.

Unluckily for such prognostications Lady Sophia had no family. A dozen children might have afforded scope sufficient even for her energies; but wealth, leisure, a husband who was seldom in the house, and a house-keeper of whom she herself stood in awe, and who ruled the establishment with a rod of iron, left its nominal mistress free to manage the concerns of all her acquaintance.

Primarily she was, as we have already shown, a doctor. No recognised physician could drug and diagnose with a firmer conviction in his own judgment. Had Colonel Jessop's silly wife only known what was good for her, she would never have declined dandelion or any other tea prescribed by Lady Sophia, when desirous of winning her way in Chesterfield Gardens. On that point, indeed, it might almost be said that Lady Sophia was soft; and certainly a believer in her favourite plaster would have had a better chance with her than any other aspirant for her august benediction.

But people cannot be always ill, and people can be almost always in need of advice—or so thought this arbitress of human fate; and if

they would only have come to her for the valuable commodity which she had ever in hand, she would have seen to it that nothing went wrong, as things always were going wrong in the world around her. It was her grievance that she was obliged to seek out, instead of being sought.

“I have had such a fatiguing errand,” she would announce. “That tiresome business of the So-and-So’s has taken up my entire day. I have had to hurry from place to place, and talk by the hour to stupid creatures who could not be made to see the plain facts of the case.”

It would not occur to the speaker that the “stupid creatures” were more stubborn than stupid; and that the interest taken by an outsider in a family affair, and her resolution to direct and supervise and say what every one was to do, and how they all ought to feel, was simply regarded as so much meddlesome impertinence.

Ida Barnet had pronounced the principal personage of her first house-party a very rude woman; and Tom had exclaimed, “Like her

cheek!" behind backs. Other tongues than theirs often made use of the same phrase.

But rudeness and "cheek" are seldom openly resented when exhibited by an earl's daughter whose position is assured, and whose *entourage* is imposing.

Lady Sophia lived in state, travelled in state, received and entertained in state—wherefore, although it may be said, and truly, that none of this warranted the ill-breeding whereof she was accused, there is no denying the fact that she was preserved by it from the rebuffs which would have been the lot of any humbler vagabond.

"Vagabond" was Sir Robert's own term as applied to his wife. He did not interfere with Lady Sophia's vagabondish habits, and indeed considered them in the light of a safety valve for feverish vivacity which might otherwise have been turned in a less harmless direction—but he laughed off the matter to his friends. "She is such a deuced active woman, she must be always doing something; so she is on the trot day and night; a perfect vagabond," he would say, as from his club-window he beheld

the well-known barouche with its well-known occupant roll past. And then he would wonder comfortably to himself whither the barouche was bound, and who was now having the benefit of Lady Sophia's sharp-edged wisdom?

It had amused Sir Robert in his quiet way to perceive that none of poor Tom Barnet's children paid homage to their august relation. His wife was their father's cousin; and on first arriving at Duckhill a good deal had been made of the cousinship, and of sundry reminiscences connected with Tom and Ida's childish days; but these had gradually lapsed; and although Lady Sophia had held on to the tie of blood as affording a claim to correct and instruct, to pounce upon deficiencies, and shake her finger at irregularities, she had not taken kindly enough to the young people, either generally or collectively, to desire that in future they would call her "Cousin Sophia."

Ida, in particular, had irritated her—as she had irritated Ida. It had been a vast condescension on the part of Lady Sophia and Sir Robert to betake themselves down to a dull country house many hours from town, in the

dead of winter—and her ladyship for one, had not found such condescension appreciated.

We, who see behind the scenes, know that it was appreciated; that host and hostess were alike in an agony of agitation and excitement over the whole affair; but they had too much sense to be profoundly grateful. Very well did they know to what was due the appearance not only of the Clarkes, but of all the other invited guests; and it was this knowledge which served to intensify the despair subsequently experienced.

To shoot had the party come—not to befriend.

But Lady Sophia, who had made a virtue of satisfying her own curiosity, as well as her husband's love of sport, had considered that the young people would be as wax in her hands. She had ordered about their father, the scatter-brained Tom Barnet whose laugh was lamented by General Thistleblow; and of course she would order about the present generation also.

The present generation had revolted.

Tom, the new Tom, had listened respectfully,

it is true ; but he had done none of the things Lady Sophia told him to do ; while Ida had absolutely displayed temper superadded to rebellion. It had ended by her calling Ida in her own mind, and to Sir Robert, “ that girl.”

“ That girl thinks she knows everything, and will take advice from nobody. The idea of presuming to suppose she can manage a household of servants, and entertain visitors, and do without a governess for the children, and—and everything ! A girl who has seen nothing and been nowhere ! It is preposterous—outrageous. Some one ought to insist—to *insist*—upon her having a proper lady companion for herself, and a resident governess for Jenny and Louie. I have said all I could say ; indeed, I offered to take the trouble of looking out a couple myself, and sending them down directly on my return—two sisters I thought would be so nice and cheerful in a house—and she might have had foreigners, for I should not have objected to foreigners if Ida fancied them—I would have consulted her tastes and done everything to please and satisfy her ; but, no, she would not

listen to it! Positively she would not listen to it! Turned off the subject whenever I began, and would not even let me put an advertisement in the *Guardian*. I told her the *Guardian* was the proper paper for young people like her and Tom to read; and explained how particular they ought to be to have the right kind of paper in a house like theirs; but all I got was that the *Times* had always been taken in at Duckhill, and that they meant to go on with it. 'Meant' to go on! She would not even say they would consider the point. Oh, dear, no! Ida is far too lofty to consider any question not started by one of themselves. Perhaps if Jenny or Louie had put it to her—children though they be, I observe she listens to them sometimes—but nothing that I could say had the very slightest effect. I might as soon try to shake the Tower of London as to unsettle one of Ida Barnet's convictions."

"Ay, you met your match there, my lady."

It had added not a little to Lady Sophia's spleen that Sir Robert beheld in her discomfiture only an excellent jest.

Sir Robert would not allow that he had seen

any harm in Ida. He had been out of humour with Tom; annoyed with the weather; and as indignant as it was in his nature to be, that the guests with whom he was expected to consort were men who differed from him in politics, and with whom he could in consequence hold no congenial intercourse on the one subject which interested him, besides sport. He could not talk for ever about sport, and it was disgusting to be boxed up with Thistleblow and Jessop, who knew next to nothing of political affairs, yet whose votes went the wrong way; while the only other man of his own age was Lord Whortlebury, who sat on the opposite side of the House.

But in his vituperation against such mismanagement, Sir Robert did not include Ida; whereas Lady Sophia blamed Ida for her brother's misdeeds as well as for her own. Could her ladyship's lynx eyes have detected the smallest approach to levity of demeanour in the stately maid who held herself so upright, and did the honours so punctiliously in the halls of her fathers, Ida would have seen Lady Sophia at her best—or worst. But

prudery itself could not take umbrage at anything which went on at Duckhill.

No prim spinster, no pattern of conjugal virtue, could have exhibited more severe and rigid propriety, not merely in her own person but in all the arrangements which passed through her hands, than did the young mistress of the house during the trying period referred to.

Several young men had been present. Captain Vernon and his brother liked amusing girls; but after one or two attempts they gave up trying to be amused by Ida; while towards Mr. Stafford her manner was so precisely the same as it might have been towards her own great-grandfather had he been present in person, that even when indignant with Maurice for remaining behind, Lady Sophia in her wildest dreams had not supposed an inducement could have been found in the person of her young cousin.

Blinded by egotism, intolerant of opposition, and accustomed to subservience, she would yet not be wantonly unjust towards those who opposed or defied her. She would not bridle her

tongue as to any of Ida Barnet's enormities, but she would not invent enormities for her.

Wherefore all that passed between Colonel Jessop and Lady Sophia when these two met and denounced Duckhill and its inmates, as already narrated, left Ida's name untouched; and it was only when fresh revelations had newly coloured the retrospect, that the letter was penned which reached the frost-bound manor on the afternoon in question.

We left Ida with the letter in her hand.

"From Lady Sophia Clarke," she murmured. "What can Lady Sophia be writing to me about? That everlasting governess, or lady companion, I suppose? Perhaps she put the advertisement in the *Guardian* in spite of me! All right, my dear Lady Sophia, do your worst. Write, and recommend, and advertise, and interview, if you please; you can't *make* me take your lady, and I can snap my fingers at all the rest. Our only lawful guardian died with aunt Joanna, and though I am willing to hear what good old Bess"—(these were I fear, the very words of the irreverent minx)—"though I am ready to hear what that good old

soul has to say, I am under no need to go by her any more than by old Sophia. Now, then, let us see what about this lady companion—this lady-killer,” absently unfolding the sheet, while still gazing abroad over the snowy landscape, where, however, no Maurice was yet to be seen.

But the first words which met the reader’s eye caused an instant change of front.

“Mr. Stafford?” she exclaimed. “What in the world can she have to say about Mr. Stafford?” Glancing hastily over the first line or two, she then proceeded to read half aloud, “The Mr. Maurice Stafford, whom I am sorry to say Sir Robert and I met at your house, and who I hear with real regret is still staying on.” “Still staying on” in Lady Sophia’s large masterful handwriting, brought the sentence to the bottom of the page. Ida glanced from the window as she turned the sheet.

“Very much ‘still staying’ on,” she smiled to herself. “I suppose I am to be taken to task for this piece of indecorum—this having a young man ‘still staying on’ when there is neither a lady companion, nor a governess to

make up the party !” Then starting to her feet as a distant object emerged into view. “Is that him? It is some one—something—some dark creature. Oh, it is only a horse!—how tiresome. Well, to finish Lady Sophia—it is very diverting, Lady Sophia’s having come in at this precise moment.” (Reads). “You will, I am sure, give me credit for not being a person to spread unfounded reports, so that when I do most earnestly beseech you, my dear Ida, to be upon your guard against that most insidious young man, who it appears is well known in certain circles, you may be sure I do it most reluctantly, and only from a sense of painful duty. I knew some little time ago that Mr. Stafford was not what he seemed to you, to us, and to all at Duckhill, during our pleasant visit there.” (Ida, *loquitur*, “Pleasant visit !”) “But I did not know until this morning that he had any object in thus masking his real character, and deluding not only us, but you and Tom—you, Ida, in particular. I hear now, I need not say with what concern, that he is paying his addresses to you. He is a ruined spendthrift, and a gambler to boot,

and were I not writing to a young girl, it would be easy to add more. Doubtless he thinks you will have, if not a fortune, at least a competence—whereas he has nothing. This I believe to be the simple truth about Mr. Maurice Stafford; and if this warning should be in time to prevent your giving him any further encouragement, I shall rejoice at having been the medium of saving you from a lamentable fate. Your usual prudence and reticence of behaviour”—(“Give the devil his due!” thought but did not enunciate Lady Sophia)—“will have, I doubt not, so far have enabled you to check over-rapid attentions, so that I have every hope I shall be enabled to prevent further mischief. Yours affectionately,

“SOPHIA CLARKE.”

This was the letter; but in the postscript—as it hath ever done—lay the sting of the whole.

“Of course I do not know whether this is anything to you, or not,” proceeded the ready pen; “but if Tom thinks it worth his while, Sir Robert will inform him of all the particulars, which one lady can hardly write to another.”

Until she came to this postscript, Ida's countenance had worn an air of scorn, and she had from time to time broken out into little exclamations and ejaculations with which we have not needed to trouble our readers. She had scarcely even been impatient of the large writing which covered page after page, and seemed to magnify the accusation in its course.

It was almost amusing, coming as it did.

But this postscript? For the first time the solitary girl started, and the smile fled from her lips.

Sir Robert knew, and Sir Robert would inform her brother! Sir Robert was an honest man; a man not likely to be carried away by a *canard*; a man on whose word she had only that day heard her brother observe he would rely sooner than on that of most other men.

Tom had said so, and Maurice Stafford had assented; avowing that from all he had seen of Sir Robert he had come to the same conclusion. He had not met the Clarkes before coming to Duckhill, and he had smiled at the remembrance of Lady Sophia; but he had had several long talks with Sir Robert—indeed he had

been the only person who had—and had decided that he was a good sort.

The phrase rose cruelly before Ida now. Sir Robert was “a good sort,” and Sir Robert would give Tom “all particulars.” Her colour changed; her lip twitched; the letter-bag, which till now had lain upon her lap, fell with a rattle to the floor.

She again glanced from the window.

Still no Maurice. He had been trapped by a swollen brook which had not been sufficiently frozen to admit of his crossing at the usual point, thus entailing a round of half a mile.

But for this cause, he would have been in before the post came.

“I—I don’t quite understand this,” whispered poor Ida to herself, turning again to the first page of her correspondent’s letter. “If it had been only Lady Sophia—Lady Sophia was nettled because she could not carry off our one good guest, whom everybody liked, and who in his turn liked only us; Lady Sophia went off angry with Maurice, and angry, especially angry with me. I could quite understand her saying anything and writing anything to annoy

us both, and—separate us. She saw how things were between us sooner than we did ourselves, I daresay. I, at least, did not see at all, at that time. But it isn't possible—it isn't possible—that she could be so wicked as to go and make up an entire falsehood. Oh, but she need not have done that, she only needed to go gossiping about, and get hold of some absurd story! If only she had not said that about Sir Robert! And how am I to tell Tom, and how is he to ask Sir Robert? I can't tell Tom until there is something to tell. And there is nothing—as yet—nothing.” Another glance from the window.

Then a long pause.

“What if it should be true?” The words burst aloud from Ida's lips, and at the same moment she saw Maurice coming.

With a sudden impulse she rose from her seat, and, trembling in every limb, stumbled across the little room, passed through the door, and shut it behind her.

When he entered he found the apartment empty.

CHAPTER XII.

“WHY DOES IDA NOT COME?”

WAS Ida coy, or was she vexed, or was she unwell? Possibly she had merely retreated to her own room at the sound of his footsteps, and would return within the minute. She might not care to seem to be awaiting him.

He dropped into a chair, then caught sight of the letter-bag whose leathern jaws, half open, permitted a stream of documents to litter the floor by its side.

“Post in, eh?” said Maurice, rousing himself; and to pass the moment he crossed the room and picked up the bag and its scattered contents, looking to see if any of the envelopes were addressed to himself as he did so.

None were, and he replaced the packets in the bag. Why did not Ida come?

Then he stood in the place where she had been standing, and it did not escape him that

there were signs of a hasty exit from the spot. A cushion had fallen from the easy-chair. The table-cover was dragged on one side. Surest betrayal of all, the post-bag and its freight had obviously been cast down by some one in a rapid flight.

She had been watching from the window, had she?

He would not have found her doing so, we may be very sure; but the sudden rush of emotion which had made a headlong retreat Ida's one thought, had also caused her to neglect wiping out the traces of it.

"She is only gone for a moment," said Maurice, to himself.

The moment, however, lengthened out.

"Can't I do anything? Can't I make a noise of some sort to show I'm here?" cogitated he. "I can't send for her, of course. I can't even casually ring the bell and inquire, but perhaps she would hear if I clattered about a bit;" and he banged over a footstool and shook the fire-irons. "There now, that must bring her," the noise being greater than was intended. "If she does not know I'm here—

but confound it all ! she must know, and she must know, too, that there is not too much time. I really think—but, poor girl, she is so awfully shy and strict—I daresay she hates coming into the room, now that she is out of it. The going out of it was her mistake. That was a mistake. I could have dropped in as if it were nothing—a mere accident—and she could have been sitting here as if she were never thinking about me—and we could have got over the awkwardness in no time. I wish she would come ! ”

Then he fancied a rustle in the passage without, and caught his breath, being himself not without a shade of nervous excitement.

No result, however, followed.

“ Dear me ! There can’t have been any mistake, can there ? ” cried Maurice, flinging himself round. “ I am sure the child understood me plainly enough, and I understood her. Jenny’s no fool. She cannot have gone and given the wrong message ? This is beastly awkward,”—after a pause—“ the most confoundedly awkward position I was ever in ! What is to be done ? I’ll make another diver-

sion ;” and this time he went to the door, opened it, and set it ajar. Then he coughed loudly. He would have given the world to call “*Ida*,” but he knew *Ida* would never have forgiven him.

“It would not matter if there were plenty of time,” muttered Maurice presently, “but I was late as it was, and could only reckon on half an hour or so. Twenty minutes of that has gone,” taking out his watch. “If she does not come soon—Hark ! there she is !” his heart again responding by a throb to a movement which was just audible to the ear.

It was not *Ida*.

Another ten minutes, and there was still no *Ida*. The daylight outside began to wane.

“Good God ! why doesn’t she come ?” cried Maurice at last. He had been kept upon the tenter-hooks almost longer than he could endure. Every moment might close the scene, but no moment did ; and we appeal to all young men who have ever found themselves in a like situation to say if it be not a truly awful one.

And the hapless lover had already made

himself conspicuous enough ; that is to say, he had already given sufficient signs in several quarters of the plunge he was about to take ; so that, added to his own disappointment, there was a sense of baffling the expectations of others, to complete his mortification. What was to be done ?

Supposing he were to be caught where he was, alone, and an intruder—or a supposed intruder—by persons not in the secret ! Were it Tom, or Jenny—then a thought struck him. Jenny might again be of service. He would go and seek his little messenger, who would probably not be far off now, for the light was rapidly failing, and the skaters had been warned not to remain out late on their first day on the ice.

“She has got me into this hole, and she must get me out of it,” said Maurice, gloomily taking up again the cap he had laid down on his entrance. “There’s a screw loose somewhere, that’s evident ; but it is just possible I may set it straight yet. Ida has misunderstood, I fancy ; gone to her room to take a sleep, and perhaps is expecting me after tea. It must have been a mistake my fancying she

had been sitting by the window, and bolted at sight of me. She often moves quickly. The letter-bag was nothing," and thus seeking to soothe and satisfy anxiety, he went off in search of the skaters.

* * * * *

Let us now return to Tom, trudging along towards the village post-office. His purpose in going thither, it may be remembered, was to carry up the afternoon's mail, which was not delivered by the postman, but was fetched daily by some one from the manor.

By going early, the young master would not only have an excuse for returning to the house, where he considered his presence was required, but would save the footman, to whose lot the errand usually fell, from being sent out on a raw, frosty afternoon, when he would be much better at home cleaning his plate. Being a young and careful householder, Tom's mind often ran on such details. He would not have himself gone out on purpose to spare the footman, but being out, and being in need of a pretext such as fetching the letters would afford, he could reflect with satisfaction that he would

be back at the house early enough to stop Thomas from setting forth.

Some one, however, had been earlier still. "We had a chance of sending up this afternoon, sir," explained the buxom village post-mistress; "our baker's cart came round about ten minutes ago; and we asked the man if he would kindly drop the bag at the manor. It will be quite safe, sir. I have known the man these many years."

"Oh!" said Tom. He felt slightly at a loss, as he was apt to do when any little wile of his fell through. It had seemed to him to be such a neat arrangement altogether, this calling for the letters, and taking them up, and being found in the library, busy writing, if wanted by Maurice; being able to explain, too, that he had expected some important documents, one in particular, which would demand instant attention.

And he really did expect such a letter, as will presently be seen.

Of course he could go off home just the same, and it mattered not a pin's point whether or not the letter-bag were there before him;

he could open it, extract his epistles, and be busy writing in the library presently, as well now as if he had himself been the bearer of the particular blue envelope expected; but for the moment he looked and he felt an interrogative "Oh—h?"

He had sat down with his gun between his knees, and was not sorry for the brief rest. A morning's skating and an afternoon's shooting—even though the latter had been cut short—had entailed a fair amount of bodily fatigue, just sufficient to make a perch comfortable, while listening to the prattle of the good woman behind the counter.

"So they're gone, eh?" said he, presently. "They're early this afternoon."

"Always in by this time, sir."

"Are they? Didn't know that. We might as well have them up a little sooner sometimes, then. I should be glad of them sooner. Didn't know they were in before this time usually."

"We do get them sooner than we used to do, sir. Excuse me, that's the telegraph going," and the speaker turned round.

"Eh? Oh, good-day, then," said the young

squire, rising and preparing to depart. But he had only advanced a few paces from the door when a shout recalled him. The post-mistress herself was calling his name aloud.

“It’s for you, sir—the message. Will you come back, sir, and then you can get it at once? I must not stop,” and the speaker flew back and was attending to the despatch by the time Mr. Barnet had retraced his steps.

“For me?” said he, rather surprised. Then, with a sudden recollection, “Oh, I daresay about Beech Farm. I am glad that fellow has telegraphed; it looks as if he were keen.”

But the telegram which was handed him almost immediately was not from a possible tenant of Beech Farm. It was from an unknown individual, presumably a nurse, or attendant, summoning him to the bedside of an elderly relative from whom, to put it plainly, he had expectations. Not for himself; he was already in full possession of all he was ever likely to have in this world; but he had been distinctly informed by Mrs. Hilary, who was a woman of few words but of spirited action, that he “need not bother his head about his

sisters if he wished to marry and turn them out of Duckhill, for that she would look to it that they had a roof over their heads."

It was this Mrs. Hilary who was now ill, and who had sent for him.

It was characteristic of the young squire that he had never breathed a syllable of the above communication in any mortal ear.

He had brought his sisters back to the old place, and had installed them in the rooms which had been theirs in childhood. He had seen them arranging and projecting, as though Duckhill were to be their home for life. And he had smiled approval of all they did or planned. I doubt if it had once occurred to Ida, and certainly it had not to Jenny or Louie, that a queen consort, if such were ever to reign at the manor, might not see things in the same light. That Tom might marry seemed a far-off possibility, but that Tom's wife would not adore them or they her, was not to be thought of.

Tom, however, in his solemn, pondering young soul, looked ahead. He did not mean always to be a bachelor, and what if—and this

and that contingency would occasionally rise to view.

At such times Mrs. Hilary's assurance was as "comforting" as the companionship of Maurice Stafford; but with a curious old-fashioned delicacy of mind entirely out-of-date among modern young people, even in private consultations the elder brother neither hinted at the prospective legacy nor at the possibility of its being needed in the manner suggested by his cousin.

He now stared at the telegram with a blank countenance.

There was no doubt about its urgency; nor about the wisdom of its being acted upon promptly.

"Mrs. Hilary seriously ill. Desires to see you. Come at once." Such were the words of the message.

But how was he to go at once? It was already between three and four o'clock, and the latest train for York left at four. It was a slow, bungling train on a wretched little side line, and even by catching it he would not be at his journey's end until a late hour of the

night, since York was only the half-way station, at which he had to change for another cross-country, jog-trot, happy-go-lucky little locomotive.

Yet this was his only chance of reaching Pine Ridge the same day, and to put off till another day would hardly do. He knew Mrs. Hilary. She was not a woman to send for him until she had absolute occasion to do so; if by delay he offended the old lady, very serious consequences might ensue.

Besides which, Tom Barnet, who had another mediæval streak in his nature, felt grateful to Mrs. Hilary. He always felt grateful to people who were kind to him and his sisters—more especially to his sisters. Attention to them was the surest way to win his affections; and the neglect, or more strictly speaking, the cool indifference displayed by the aunt who had had charge of Jenny and Louie during the tender years of childhood, had roused almost a passion of resentment in his breast.

Of such emotions he could not speak; no one ever heard him enumerate the wrongs of the past; but perhaps if even General Thistleblow

had known to what was due the curtness of speech, and the something of defensive in Tom's attitude when announcing the plan of his future life, he would not have taken the umbrage he did at his ward's spirit of independence.

It now behoved our young man to look afresh after the interests of those so dear to him. He felt — or thought he felt — a proper amount of sorrow that Mrs. Hilary should be dying, but perplexity and disturbance of mind overshadowed the sorrow. How on earth could he go off on a long, cold journey without so much as a handbag? And without having anything to eat? And with shabby shooting clothes? Moreover, his boots were sopping wet.

And there was also another view of the matter to be considered. He had a household of people, who had only arrived on the previous day: what was to be done with them? Worst of all, he had Maurice Stafford, who was on the brink of a proposal for his sister.

He couldn't go. No, by Jove, he could not

go—at least not that day. It must be kept dark that the telegram had come in time; and if he had only not been fool enough to walk round by the post-office it would not have been in time! He could not possibly have received it before the latest train had left.

What a nuisance! What an abominable nuisance! What—"Oh, dash it all," groaned poor Tom, aloud, "I have let myself in for it, and there's no use going on at my luck—but what am I to do?"

For he realised, more and more that the oftener he said he could by no possibility obey this summons, the more certain it became that he would have to do so.

He was not in the habit of lying.

"Shall we send a reply for you, sir?"

It was the post-mistress who spoke. Then Tom became aware that he had been gazing at her with open, blind eyes for some time past, and that she must have seen that he was in search of an inspiration.

"A reply, eh?" said he, miserably.

"You will want to say you can't go to-night,

perhaps?" suggested Mrs. Bowdler, who naturally was in the confidence of the telegram. "The only train you could catch——" glancing at the clock.

"I couldn't catch it; I could never get up to the manor and down again in time."

"No, sir, that you could not. You might go by an early train to-morrow, sir."

Tom was silent. Mrs. Hilary's voice, face, the very clasp of her warm, strong hand on his shoulder as she spoke out the blunt words which meant so much to Ida, and Jenny, and Louie, rushed back upon his memory, and a heavy sigh burst from his lips.

For Ida's sake chiefly he would have stayed; for Ida's sake he must now go.

"Say I'm coming."

"Beg your pardon, sir?" Mrs. Bowdler thought she could hardly have heard aright.

"Say—stop, hand me a form." He leaned the gun which till now had been held between his knees, against a corner within reach, and threw himself over the counter on which the post-mistress bustled to place a telegraph form and pencil.

“Coming. Will be with you to-night,” wrote Tom. He might, of course, have omitted the “coming,” but he was not a good hand at condensation of this sort. And, besides, what did it matter?

Now, that he had made up his mind, he began to think of other things. The lease of Beech Farm, for instance. It was very important that a tenant whom he had in view for Beech Farm should have an answer by return of post, supposing an offer had been made; and that offer was as likely as not in the very letter-bag of which he had been defrauded. How should he get the letter? Or get word to Mr. Trusty about it?

He must also let them know at home where he had gone, and why.

And he must order his things to be sent.

It ended in his despatching a brief pencil note to Ida, which was not without important results as regards our little story; after which the luckless traveller bethought himself of his own personal and pressing requirements.

He had half an hour at command. Could

Mrs. Bowdler give him something to eat and drink in the interval? Could she lend him an overcoat of Bowdler's? And a rug to cover his knees?

His pipe and his tobacco pouch were luckily in his pocket, but, save for them, he had literally no provision for a dreary journey on a bitter night.

Mrs. Bowdler, however, rose worthily to the occasion.

"Come upstairs, sir, this moment," cried she, with the gratification of good-nature and love of gossip combined. "Come right up," raising the shelf of the counter for him to pass through. "Bowdler's out, but you can have anything you like of his; and let me beg of you, Mr. Tom," dropping into friendly phraseology as she warmed to the work before her, "do let me beg of you to change your socks. Ay, and your boots, too, if I can't get yours dried in time, and I doubt I can't. The boots will be too big, for Bowdler's a big man; but anything's better than wet feet;" pulling out warm woollen garments as she spoke, and glancing bashfully round. "You won't mind my

saying it, Mr. Tom, but there's more than socks here; and anything Bowdler has, you are welcome to. Just make a change—make a change—I'll leave you to yourself—and they're all well aired—I see to the airing of everything, for there's no trusting the girl. And now I'll hurry down and get you some tea, or some beer—there's no time for a chop—but there's cold meat in the house——” descending as she spoke, until her friendly voice died away in the regions below.

So contagious is cheerful sympathy and aid, that by the time Tom reappeared, clad anew in warm, clean garments, he felt almost in spirits for the start.

A fire blazed in the little parlour, and a meal, tempting to a hungry man, was spread upon the table.

“’Pon my word, this is very nice,” said Tom. “I’m really awfully obliged, Mrs. Bowdler. I don’t know how I should have got on without you,” sitting down and beginning at once upon the viands. “I have about a quarter of an hour, haven’t I? It will only take me a couple of minutes to run up from here to the station.

But, by the way, there's another thing: I have no money; I never take my purse out shooting——"

"Will three sovereigns do, sir?" Triumph beaming in her eye, his hostess produced a purse. "I thought about the money while Maggie was getting your tea," she explained, "and you'll excuse my just putting it in my own old purse——"

"You are really too good," said Tom, warmly.

Whatever General Thistleblow might think of his late ward's manner, no one at Duckhill ever found fault with it.

"And he shook my hand as grateful and thankful as never was," cried the worthy post-mistress afterwards, "and accepted Bowdler's socks, ay, and his hum-hums" (under her breath) "as pleasant as you please, dear lamb. And I do think we set him off comfortable! Maggie here ran up and took his ticket while he was eating in the parlour, and she watched for the signal falling, so as to give him to the last drop of his time; and he had Bowdler's rug from off our own bed to lay across his

knees—we can easy manage with something else till he comes back again—and I'm sure a nicer, sweeter, gratefuller young gentleman never was, and it's a downright pleasure to do anything to serve him."

CHAPTER XIII.

CORRESPONDENCE TAMPERED WITH.

“A NOTE from your master?” exclaimed Miss Barnet in surprise, when, having been obliged to admit an imperative maid, she was informed why Flowers had presumed to insist upon the bed-room door’s being unbolted. “There is nothing wrong, is there? A note,” turning over Tom’s pencil scrap in her hand. “There has been no accident?” her thoughts flying to the guns of the sportsmen. (“But I heard him come in,” reflected the speaker, the “him” not referring to her brother, as we know. “Can he have gone to Tom? Can Tom be sending for me?”) colour and spirit rising. Such a message would not have suited Ida Barnet.

She had heard Maurice tramp past about five minutes before, and had raised her head at the sound. When his footsteps quite died

away she had sighed. Until then she had not known how supporting had been the knowledge that at least Maurice was there, within a few feet of herself; and that directly she could make up her mind to throw to the winds Lady Sophia's insinuations, she could go in, and let her lover speak. Now he has gone, and with him this chance.

"I daresay it is for the best," murmured the poor girl, ruefully, "but—I did not quite—mean him—to go away."

When Tom's note was brought in, however, Ida was herself again. She was not going to be ordered by Tom. Whatever she might do, should be done of herself—not at the bidding of Tom. And if Maurice had gone to her brother, it was—, a lump rose in her throat, and she would not say what it was.

With trembling fingers she undid the fastenings of the envelope. But the first words caused as instantaneous an alteration of demeanour as the opening sentence of Lady Sophia's letter had done before. This time, however, interest flagged instead of deepening,

on perceiving whose name formed the subject of the communication.

“Oh, Mrs. Hilary?” said Ida, her brow clearing; “poor Mrs. Hilary dying, and sent for Tom? Stop a moment, Flowers—your master—just stop while I read, I may have to send you”—reading—“There is no time even to come back for my portmanteau. Tell Richards to pack it for a day or two, and send it by early train to-morrow. There is a Sunday train about ten o’clock. Oh, Flowers,” said her young mistress looking up, “will you attend to this? Your master has been called away,” and she gave the particulars, and the message for Richards the butler, who also acted as Tom’s valet. “Oh, and he wants his letters, too; bring the letter-bag—it is in the boudoir” (an involuntary sigh escaped); “bring it me now, and I will give you the letters.” Then, turning again to the scrawled half-sheet of paper in her hand, as the maid departed on her errand, “What is this about Beech Farm?” she murmured.

Wet, worried, and hungry, Tom had yet contrived to remember Beech Farm when scrib-

bling his hasty directions, before ascending the spiral staircase to Mrs. Bowdler's upper chamber; and Ida now received instructions to open all letters before forwarding any, and extract from the rest a missive, should such there be, from the prospective tenant. This was to be sent over to Mr. Trusty, with news of his departure, and authority to act as he and his master had agreed upon in their last conversation on the subject.

At another time, Ida, who was well up in such affairs, would have been busy and important over her part of the business: and even as it was, she lost no time in searching for the document in question, aware that the farm was one of the best on the estate, and that to secure a good tenant, in place of a worthless fellow whom Tom had been driven to turn out, was of the utmost consequence.

There were three or four letters for Tom, all of which might mean anything, or nothing; none were addressed by familiar hands, and none bore any device upon the envelope. Crushing down the dull ache which, in despite of other thoughts, was still low in her heart,

Ida began diligently to open letter after letter. The first three were of no interest; a bill for oats and hay, another for saddlery, and a request to join a country-town club which had lately been started. There were now only two more to be glanced at. "This is it," said Ida jumping to a conclusion, as she unfolded a blue sheet of paper. "A bad hand—and from London—I know the man was to be in London—(reading)—‘Dear Tom,’—oh? oh, not the tenant?—(reading)—‘Yours very truly, Alfred Jessop.’ Colonel Jessop?" exclaimed Ida, in surprise, "Colonel Jessop? Who next? One would have thought we had had enough already to-day without that ‘little beast of a Jessop’ (quoting Tom) putting in his oar. What does he want? Something disagreeable, I’ll answer for it. Disagreeables always come together. What is all this palaver about?" for Jessop, unlike the more direct Lady Sophia, did not get to his point till the second page. When, however, Ida had skimmed the preliminaries, and flashed her eye, as it were, round the corner, there was the name again which had already sent a knife to her heart.

For a moment her head seemed to go round. She caught her breath, and shut her eyes. Should she read on, or not?

“Perhaps I ought not,” murmured the poor girl to herself. “But then I really must. I must know; I am the person who is meant to know. If it is to do any good—these people’s telling Tom—I must hear what they have to say; and now that Tom is gone, and—and it is so much to me”—with a little sob—“I must not mind, even if he is angry. I have got to know what this—this talebearer has to tell,” and with the words she deliberately unfolded the sheet, and read every word written on it.

* * * * *

“No, I shall not go down to dinner,” said Miss Barnet, two hours afterwards, “so it is no use my dressing, Flowers,” the maid having come to announce that the dressing-gong had sounded. “Will you kindly go to Mrs. Lytton, and tell her that Mr. Tom’s being called away so suddenly, and—and all, has so upset me that—that I am really quite unable to leave my room? I am very sorry, but I can’t.”

“Dear me, Miss Ida, not go down at all? And here’s this beautiful new dress all ready for you, and me slaving myself to death ever since breakfast to get it finished in time! Do look, now—it’s just lovely. Well, now, would you not go down to the drawing-room after dinner?” perceiving that the charms of pink satin and chiffons only elicited a movement of irritation. “You might just let me come in and do your hair, and send you down as soon as they get to the sweets in the dining-room. You could slip down——”

“I tell you, Flowers, I can’t slip down; I can’t, and I won’t. I am not able. I am too wretched,” throwing herself over on the cushions of the roomy couch which stood by the side of her bedroom fire. “You forget I had a bad fall this morning,” continued Ida, recollecting the need for keeping up appearances. “These things often tell most afterwards—oh, don’t bother me,” with a sudden accession of fretful impatience; “do go away, like a good Flowers, and leave me in peace. Oh, don’t light the candles,” as the maid, with the tactlessness of her class, was striking a

match and advancing to the toilet table. "Do let the candles alone," moaned poor Ida, "my head aches so, I can't have candles or—or anything. The fire will do well enough."

"Just let me put on a coal or two, Miss Ida. The fire will be black out, if you won't let me touch it. I'll make no noise; and the room does look so dreary;" glancing round. "If your aunt should come up——"

"She is not to come up. I sent her word before that I wanted to be quiet, and she quite understood. Stop, though," as Flowers was reluctantly making for the door. "Stop: if it gets round to my aunt that I am too ill to go down to dinner, I daresay she may want to come and see me—so this is what you must do, Flowers. Now listen; and don't make a mess of it, there's a good Flowers—wait till they're all in the drawing-room expecting me; till the second gong has sounded, and dinner been announced; and then just follow Richards in, and go up to aunt Bess, and say to her that I don't feel up to coming down; that I have a dreadful headache, but that it may pass off if I am left quiet, and that I particularly hope

they will all go in to dinner and not trouble about me. Mind it is aunt Bess—Mrs. Lytton—you speak to ; and ask her from me to be good enough to take the head of the table.”

“But what a strange table it will be,” muttered the speaker to herself, the maid having departed, “with neither Tom nor me at it ! If only Jenny or Louie had been old enough ! Jenny almost might go in, as it is ! She would be better than nobody. It would be better to have her, than to have a number of visitors all sitting down together, without a single one of the family present ! Oh, if Tom and I had ever dreamed of this ! It is worse than the shooting party—far, far worse. At least, everything was proper, then, but now it seems as if neither of us cared whether it were proper or not. Neither we do. I don’t—and Tom won’t, when he hears. Those horrid, slanderous, backbiting people, how pleased they are to have this to tell ! I know how they would look. He like a malicious ape, and she like a—camel. She has just the face of an odious camel. They say camels can sneer. I suppose it is true about Maurice Stafford——”

throwing herself into a fresh attitude. "It is true, I suppose."

A tap at the door.

"Bah! that tiresome woman!" ejaculated Ida, wild with wrath; she thought Flowers had brought this upon her. But it was not aunt Bess who entered; it was only poor little Jenny in a great state of mind.

Hadn't Ida gone back to the boudoir? Hadn't she been out of her room at all? Not at all? Didn't she know that Maurice—coming close to the sofa—Maurice wanted to see her, and that he was——

"Not in the boudoir?" said Ida, hastily.

"No; oh, no." Jenny shook her head with great decision. "Oh, no; Maurice had said he should not go up again till he was sent for; he was dreadfully afraid he had had no business to go there before," the little girl added of herself, "but now he was in the gun-room, rubbing his gun and things, making believe to be busy; only he was not really busy, because he was just waiting to see if Ida would send for him."

"Nonsense! How can I send for him?" said Ida, sharply.

“Why, by me,” responded her little sister, in all good faith. “You’ll see. If you just go in there, I’ll run down to the gun-room——”

“You’ll do nothing of the kind. I never heard of such a thing.”

Jenny’s blue orbs opened ; this was very incomprehensible ; a few hours before and she had been entrusted with a most amicable response to the same request ; and now ?

“I am feeling too unwell to see any visitors,” observed Ida, after a momentary pause. “That is what you must say if anyone asks you about me ; but unless you are asked, don’t say anything. Mind, Jenny, don’t say anything unless you are asked,” emphatically. “And don’t go back to the gun-room, either. I can’t have this message-carrying going on in a house like ours. It is not at all the right thing—not at all.”

“Why, you allowed me to tell him——”

“That was different ; never mind why. You are only a little girl, and can’t understand !” —(Jenny smiled scornfully. *She* not understand !)—“but at any rate, I am not going to do it again,” continued Ida, to whom it was something of a relief to give vent to all this.

"I wonder that Maurice—that Mr. Stafford should ask it. He—he ought not to—to have presumed——"

"Oh, Ida!"

"'Oh, Ida!' What can you, a child, know about it? You say 'Oh, Ida!' to everything. Mr. Stafford has got round you with sweets and snow-rides——"

"He has not got round me any more than everyone else," indignantly retorted Jenny. "Everyone says the same of Maurice, aunt Bess, and the girls, and Harry and Charlie——"

"Pho! Harry and Charlie!"

"Even that old Lady Sophia, and those Vernon creatures——"

"And even Colonel Jessop, and General Thistleblow," cried Ida, mockingly. "It only needs General Thistleblow to complete the present quartette," scoffed she. "Lady Sophia, and Sir Robert, and——"

"What are you muttering there?" demanded Jenny, suspiciously.

But the recumbent figure had tossed over, and with her face to the sofa-back, Ida refused to answer.

“Are not you coming down to dinner?” was Jenny’s next.

“No.”

“Aren’t you?”

No answer.

“And Tom away, too!”

No answer.

“Then who is to go?” The little girl drew nearer; in her tone was the vibration of a new idea. “If Tom is away, there will be no one to sit at the bottom of the table except uncle Jack; and will aunt Bess have to sit at the head?”

“Of course.”

“It’s dreadful,” said Jenny, suggestively; “but—Ida?”

“Well?”

“Wouldn’t it be less dreadful, just a very little less, if Louie, and I——”

“Not Louie—certainly not Louie.”

“Not Louie, then, but me. Oh,” exclaimed the now hopeful and exulting little creature, “oh, Ida, I do think, I really do think it would be better if I were there. I do, indeed, Ida—just me, not Louie,” throwing

the hapless Louie over as though she were a Jonah—I should be one of us, you know, Ida; and one of us would be better than none of us. And, Ida,” her breath growing short as she stood over her sister, and put forth the plea with growing earnestness and hopes of success, “Ida, you know I have my new frock——”

“Go and put it on then, and say no more about it.”

“And go down to the drawing-room? And sit there with all the grand, grown-up people?—And hear the dinner announced, and——”

“Yes, yes—I tell you, yes.”

“I must let aunt Bess know that you told me to do it.”

“Very well. No—stop—don’t; there is no need. Aunt Bess will know soon enough. I don’t want her told about me just yet, or she will be coming bothering up here. Oh, I know she only means it kind, child—there’s no need to preach—but I can’t have anyone. Be in the drawing-room, and say nothing about it, and no one will notice.”

“But of course I must tell Louie?”

“Well, tell Louie,” wearily.

“Where—where is Louie to be, Ida?”

“What do you mean? Where should Louie be? Oh, do go away, I am getting so tired.”

“I am going this very moment. It is only just this, you see there’s Louie?”

No reply.

“Louie and I are always together when dinner is going on,” hinted Louie’s partner. “If I am away she’ll be alone to-night.”

“Well?” drily.

“Couldn’t—couldn’t you let her come in here, Ida, just for once? She’d be so lonely away in that old schoolroom; it is such a long way off, you know. And Louie would be as quiet as a mousey—I’d tell her to be quiet.”

“Oh, I can’t,” said Ida. Even such a little grasshopper as Louie was felt to be a burden at the moment.

“Very well,” replied her sister, gently. She paused for a moment, then moved softly towards the door. All her own pleasure seemed quenched.

“Oh, well, say she can come,” suddenly Ida

called out, throwing off the sofa blanket which Flowers had contrived to drop over her feet without its being observed. "Jenny—hi!—say she can come. If she dresses now—with you—she may come in and sit here with me, when you go down to the drawing-room."

"Poor little thing! Why should she be unhappy because I am?" added the speaker to herself, as the door closed after the joyous "All right!" of the retreating Jenny. "I will try not to be selfish," sighed Ida, a small, hot tear trickling down her cheek.

All the time she entirely forgot to open the last letter, which might be from the prospective tenant of Beech Farm.

CHAPTER XIV.

A PINK DRESS SCORNEO.

THE last echoes of the dinner-gong had died away, and the solemn butler had made his announcement and retired.

“Where is Ida?” exclaimed Mr. Lytton, who liked his soup hot, and was accustomed to strict punctuality in his own household. He had been well pleased with the precision of the previous evening, and had formed the conclusion that his nephew was an admirable host, and his niece an attentive hostess; but now here was Tom on the rampage—not Tom’s fault, of course, but still, there was no denying the fact—and here was Ida on the sick list! He had been informed that Ida would, however, be sufficiently recovered to present herself at half-past seven; well, why had she not done so?

Other people also wondered why. Maud and Caroline expected their cousin to appear ra-

diant in the pink robe which they knew all about, and which Flowers had, in her own phraseology, been working her fingers to the bone to have ready ; and the two deeply interested damsels who figured for themselves a grand dressing up before the mirror, now presumed that a hitch had taken place in the performance. Every moment they expected to behold a dazzling apparition. Ida, arrayed for conquest, aches and pains forgotten, would burst upon their view in all the perfection of youth, beauty, and happiness. She would startle every eye, and eclipse every woman present.

Maud did not mind being eclipsed : but her sister did—a little.

“ We might as well have brought our other dinner frocks,” she had observed plaintively, earlier in the evening, “ if Ida means to be so smart. I am sure what she wore last night would have done very well. It was a very pretty, good gown—quite good enough for a house party like this, where we are all relations except Mr. Stafford.”

“ Except Mr. Stafford ! ” echoed Maud, merrily. “ But that exception reads the riddle.

Don't tell me you would not put on all your finery if there were a Mr. Caroline in the question. Naturally Ida wishes to look her best for her Mr. Ida."

"She looked her very oddest this morning, and he admired her none the less."

"That's different. You can wear what you like to go skating,—and besides the cap and tie were becoming to Ida, and she knew it. But evening dress is evening dress; and though I haven't seen this pink satin, I suspect it will throw us all into the shade. It is pink upon pink, Ida says."

The "pink upon pink" was, however, a long time in coming. Maurice Stafford, who sat near the door, turning over a book of prints with which he appeared to be engrossed, lifted his head at every opening of the door, and glanced quickly and furtively round; but it was always some one else, some insignificant member of the circle who, late and breathless, hurried in.

Little Charlie, who was sitting by, looking over the prints also, spoke more than once to Mr. Stafford, but got no answer.

At length came Richards with a formal summons and a figure in the doorway behind him. When Maurice saw that this dimly-outlined figure was that of Ida's maid, and that she made her way across to Mrs. Lytton with an obvious apology on her lips, his heart misgave him.

And yet there was a kind of hope in such an apology. It was cruel to hope that any one was suffering, but what would be such suffering compared with—he bit his lip, and bent over the volume in front. Mrs. Lytton was explaining aloud the absence of her niece.

To Mrs. Lytton he had next to offer his arm. That could be done with alacrity; she would naturally begin about the unfortunate displacement of the dinner table, and might be led into saying more than she knew. He would pump her—pump her dry. She should tell him every single thing she knew, or suspected. He would force out of her how Ida had looked, and what she had said when last seen; and drag from the poor lady by main force her own opinion on the matter. It did not escape him that Mrs. Lytton looked more astonished

than commiserative. She did not believe in Ida's illness—neither did he.

On the opposite side of the table sat little Jenny, and it struck Maurice that Jenny looked mournfully at him.

Presently, however, the little girl forgot, and made merry with the rest. That dinner table ought not to have been a merry one by every rule and reason—the two principal entertainers being absent, the one on a sad errand, the other from a sad cause—but honestly, the dinners at Duckhill during the *régime* of Lady Sophia Clarke and General Thistleblow had been infinitely more oppressive. People out of humour, and habituated to self-indulgence, are not to be won from their mood by a well-lit, cheerful board, bright with flowers, sparkling with glass,—whereas kindlier and simpler souls, however much they may feel they ought to be sympathetically pensive under certain conditions, cannot for their lives subdue their blithesome spirits, nor modulate their accents, when gathered together to satisfy healthy appetites, and enjoy for weary limbs a well-earned repose.

Every one present had been for many hours that day out in the keen, wintry air, and brought in that delicious afterglow which exercise beneath a frosty sky diffuses through the frame. The schoolboys' cheeks flamed like red apples, and at first they were too busy with spoon and fork to speak, or look about them. Even their elders were not sorry to be permitted to go through a course or two in peace; but by-and-by all was clatter.

Harry found his tongue, and Charlie his jolly little laugh. The grown-up young lady cousins good-humouredly drew the little fellows out, their father made fun of them, the others befriended them, their mother left off talking to Maurice Stafford, and watched her darlings with beaming eyes, while Jenny wriggled in her chair with delight, and tittered more loudly than she would have dared to do in any other presence.

Stafford alone took no part in the general hilarity. Mrs. Lytton's communications were lying like a stone in his heart. Under his skilful treatment she had indeed owned to everything she knew, but it amounted to noth-

ing he did not know before. She had been as much surprised as himself at her niece's non-appearance, for at three o'clock she had left dear Ida quite recovered, and only needing rest and sleep to be her bright, bonnie self again. On returning from her sleigh ride, she had been informed by Flowers, who was on the watch, that her young mistress had retreated to her bedroom, but that she was no worse, and would be down to dinner. "I am telling you all exactly as it happened," said Mrs. Lytton, with what she considered Machiavelian diplomacy, "because naturally you and I, as the chief offenders of this morning, feel a certain responsibility. I am sure I for one, whenever I think of myself thundering down that bank——"

"At my instigation," said Maurice, with a half smile. "It all comes round to me in the long run, Mrs. Lytton. I made you come down—then I ran my skate into Miss Barnett's face. A jolly mess I have made of it altogether." After which it was comparatively easy to be silent, and permit it to be supposed that he was repenting his

misdeeds in the depths of his gloomy conscience. He was sharp enough to perceive that he might avail himself of this general supposition, while other thoughts occupied his breast.

One thing he would do; he would get speech of the solitary person present who knew something of the real state of the case, and that as soon as might be. When presently the silks and muslins rustled past, and the file of departing women was brought up by the one short skirt present, while Maurice held open the door, he leaned forward, and murmured, "Don't go to bed till I come, Jenny."

And she had to go to bed!

It was really dreadful to Jenny. Maurice's whisper thrilled her through and through with a delightful sense of consequence, and she began to expect him almost from the moment of entering the drawing-room.

Louie was there, but she must not get entangled with Louie. If Louie were to be with her, bothering to know how it all looked, and what a downstairs dinner was like, and how

the boys behaved, just when Maurice came up, it would simply spoil everything.

She would shut up Louie with a few brief sentences, at once, and then tell her that it was not polite for both of them, the only Barnets present, to be talking to each other.

Accordingly Louie was relegated to sit between her aunts and show her new piece of needlework, while Jenny herself flitted from one to another of the younger people, interchanging a word here and there, paying an attention, or discharging an errand, but carefully abstaining from anything like settled conversation, and keeping an eye on the door even while superintending the struggles of Maud and Caroline, who had severally got hold of "Pigs in Clover" and "Answers." At any moment "Pigs in Clover" could be left behind, if Maurice would but appear in the doorway.

But half-past nine o'clock came, and the gentlemen had not yet quitted the dinner table. The two elderly uncles liked to sit for some time over their wine, and Stafford had forgotten about children's early hours. He had not missed the little girls on previous evenings—

Ida had been all in all. Now he was stolidly sipping Tom Barnet's excellent claret, while Fate was thwarting him on the other side of the hall.

Enter the drawing-room, Flowers. "If you please, Miss Jenny and Miss Louie, I am to remind you it is your bedtime."

Jenny's jaw dropped. Louie rose obediently.

"What's that, little girls? Bedtime, is it?" cried the cheerful voice of aunt Bess from across the hearthrug. "How is Miss Ida, Flowers?" Somehow it was always "Miss Ida" in the household.

"She has got into bed, ma'am, thinking she would be better there. She sent me down just now to remind the young ladies it was half-past nine o'clock."

The young ladies in question glanced at their aunt. "If she would only say we might stay," thought Jenny. Ida had strict ideas, but still they might be made to give way.

"Do you think Miss Ida really wanted us to go, Flowers?" enquired the little girl, wistfully, Flowers having turned to depart, "or did

she only think it was our *usual* bedtime? You see, this isn't like a *usual* evening."

"And the boys being here, perhaps another half-hour might be granted," chimed in Mrs. Lytton, perceiving the blank disappointment of Harry and Charlie, who were in the act of proposing a round game. "Suppose Flowers were to go and ask."

"Oh, do, Flowers; do go and ask."

"You will, won't you?" cried little Charlie, running up to the maid and catching her hand. "I say, do look sharp; we'll have to go ourselves in half an hour, you know."

"Yes, please look sharp," added his brother. "We shall be awfully obliged, you know."

What abigail would not have found the situation flattering? Mrs. Lytton requesting, the little ladies beseeching, the boys entreating—what could the amiable Flowers do but yield? Back she came, however, looking a little less airy than she went.

"I am sorry, ma'am," addressing Mrs. Lytton with a somewhat frightened face, "but Miss Ida won't hear of it. She seemed almost vexed. Better come at once, young ladies.

Miss Ida wants you to go in to her to say 'good-night.' She seemed disappointed you was not with me before."

"Oh—of course—very well—you had better go, my dears, at once;" even aunt Bess struck her colours on the instant. "Ida is so right and wise about you"—kissing them both fondly—"she thinks a rule ought to be kept. We must begin earlier to-morrow night—no, on Monday night—that is all. If we had thought about a game sooner we could have easily started one long ago, and got it in before bed-time."

"We can come, Flowers; we don't need to be waited for:" in the midst of her rueful "good-nights" Jenny was still listening for Maurice Stafford's step. "We'll come this moment," she continued, impatiently, and jerked down a candlestick as she spoke.

The candlestick had to be set up again—that took time—but still Maurice did not appear; and he was not even in the passage outside—a last hope. The door of the dining-room was shut.

"You are late," was Ida's greeting, as the

two shamefacedly made their appearance, "and you know you should not have asked to sit up. It was too bad to make me seem a sort of ogress——"

"It wasn't we who began it. It was aunt Bess, and the boys—they set us on to ask."

"You ought to have told them you never sat up for anyone."

"But, Ida, we have, you know—lately—now and then."

They had; Stafford had asked for them. I don't think Jenny would now have recalled this to her sister—instinct would have held her back—but Louie knew nothing.

"That's it—that is just it," exclaimed Ida, sitting up in bed the better to take command of the mutineers, "you do a thing once, or, perhaps, twice, and expect to do it always! One cannot give in to a single indulgence without your encroaching. There was Jenny—I allowed her to sit up to late dinner, and have a place, and everything—and yet she has never been near me since! I thought, of course, she would have been up the instant dinner was over."

And Jenny had been about Ida's own business !

"I thought I—I had better not leave the drawing-room," faltered she.

"You mean you wished to stay there," retorted her sister, in withering accents. "You had better speak the truth."

The brave little girl held her tongue.

"It was not very kind," said poor Ida, bitterly, "to forget all about me lying alone here, and be enjoying yourselves laughing, and talking, and playing games downstairs."

Still Jenny was silent. It was true that she had been laughing and talking and wanting to play games—even if unable to accomplish this last feat—but it was not true that she had forgotten the interests of one so dear. And somehow she was learning not to blurt out Maurice Stafford's name either. Something was wrong between Maurice and Ida, hopelessly, lamentably wrong, and it behoved her to tread with wary feet betwixt the two.

"What are they all doing now?" next demanded the inquisitor, from her pillows; having had her say, and subjugated the delin-

quents thoroughly, she now resumed a more ordinary tone. "I suppose they are all having a good time?" And something of the resentment the thought inspired breathed in the question.

"Splendid," responded Louie, perceiving that the worst was over, and scrambling up on the bed as she spoke, "those boys are such fun——"

"Jenny, can't *you* speak? What are they doing? Who is speaking to who? How are they sitting?"

"The gentlemen have not come in from the dining-room yet," replied Jenny, in funereal accents.

"Oh," said Ida—and asked no more.

The next morning, Sunday morning, dawned; and long ere the daylight was fully established, the rattle of hail and the howl of sweeping winds betrayed what manner of day was in store for the occupants of Duckhill Manor. They were back to their old weather again.

"Beastly, isn't it?" said Maurice Stafford, cheerfully, as the party assembled at breakfast, and one and another returned from a

gloomy survey of the outer scene. "Even the snow-plough road has been snowed-up afresh, Jenny. We shan't get out to-day, that's certain."

He was, however, equally certain that he should get somewhere else that day, and with renewed hope came renewed cheerfulness. A night's rest had shrunk all the ill omens of the previous evening into trifles not worth consideration, and he had made up his mind to disregard them, and forget their existence.

"Beastly weather, sir," said he, addressing Mr. Lytton in the pleasant tones which Jes-sop and Thistleblow had found so irresistible. "No doubt the same all over the country. This will do for our ice, I expect, boys."

"Do for our ice?" echoed the little fellows, who had not thought of that. "Do for our ice? Do you mean we shan't have any more skating?" in accents that might fitly have queried regarding the end of all things.

"Why, look for yourselves," said Maurice. "Hark to that!" as a blast swept by, and flung its rattling hail like sharp-edged teeth

against the windows. "What does that mean, eh?"

"I doubt we shall have a storm," subjoined the boys' father. "I thought so last night. There was a haze about the moon——" and the discussion wandered off among the elements.

Jenny, however, wondered at Maurice. He seemed quite in good spirits. She had looked in on Ida, on her way downstairs, and Ida was in bed, and scarcely spoke. In response to interrogation she had avowed her intention of remaining where she was. Obviously she was still in yesterday's vein, if Maurice were not. Neither Jenny nor Louie knew what to say about Ida.

However, breakfast passed and the party broke up. Nobody could go to church, that was certain; and, whatever other people thought about it, this was an experience both novel and exciting to Harry and Charlie. A whole Sunday of story-books and liberty! By the end of the day they were heartily tired of both, but during the early part of the forenoon the prospect was alluring.

So it was to Stafford, who felt he should now be able to choose his own methods of procedure. He did not wish to resort to strong measures, if ordinary ones came to hand. An invalid naturally would not rise in the early morning; he would wait till she had risen, eaten her luncheon, and established herself in the little boudoir.

Crossing the hall he met Mr. Trusty, the farm bailiff.

“Oh, Mr. Stafford, sir, it’s you? I was hoping it was you. Perhaps you can advise me. I’m in such a confusion with Mr. Tom’s being called away, and no letter from that Hodgson we had in view for the farm——”

“For Beech Farm? Mr. Barnet told me about it. Hasn’t the man written? That’s odd. You were to have heard yesterday.”

“We were, sir; and I made sure Mr. Tom had heard. I was expecting some one to be over every minute last night. Then I heard about Mr. Tom’s going off; but it seems there’s nothing been said about a letter.”

“There may have been a letter for all that. The bag came in after he left. I saw it my-

self, with a heap of letters for your master in it."

"That's true, sir; but I've sent up, and Miss Ida says there's nothing, and she was to open all the letters. It will be a pity if we lose that man; he is the very tenant we want; I have a great mind——" and the speaker paused.

"To go up to London straight away? I should," said Maurice. "If you trust to posts, they play you tricks at the best of times, and now, there's no saying what they may not be up to. Go to London to-day——"

"To-day, sir? no, sir; not on the Sabbath day. I'm a religious man, Mr. Stafford; I never do business on the Sabbath."

"Oh, ah, yes; I had forgotten it was Sunday, that's the fact," replied Maurice. "But the case being urgent, if you went by to-night's train—there is one about nine o'clock, isn't there? The day will be over by then, you know."

The bailiff eyed him dubiously. There was such a train, and he knew it. He knew, moreover, the importance of action and the neces-

sity for promptitude. On the other hand a freezing journey by night? Mr. Trusty shook his head. "I'll wait till to-morrow," he said, turning away. "May be there'll be a letter to-morrow; or I'll hear from Mr. Tom—or something. If Hodgson is to be our tenant he'll not be put off for want of an answer on the instant. If it's to be—it's to be. Good morning, Mr. Stafford."

"Good morning, old fool."

People sometimes presumed on Trusty's deafness.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SOLITARY LEGATEE.

MEANTIME Tom Barnet, whom Fate had thus isolated from the rest of the party, found himself in a position which was not without its pleasant side. He had surmounted the miseries of the journey, arrived at Mrs. Hilary's residence, found that he was in time not only to see his elderly cousin alive, but to a certain extent in possession of her faculties, and, after an excellent night's rest, had risen sound in wind and limb, to which there was added a delightful consciousness of having done his duty in the teeth of adverse circumstances.

There was no one but himself at Pine Ridge. He was glad of that. All the way thither he had been cogitating as to whom he should find there, and in what light he might expect to be looked upon, supposing some Hilary relations—there might be Hilary relations, although he

had never heard of them—were on the spot, in response to a summons like his own? Once or twice he had told himself very plainly that it was a deuced awkward position he was placed in, and a monstrous disagreeable thing which had been laid upon him to do. Of course Mrs. Hilary had a perfect right to do it; and if she chose to impose any other unwelcome ordeal upon him he must submit,—but he had hardly been able to forgive himself for cutting short his shooting and making that luckless *détour* by the village.

If it had not been for that unfortunate freak of wisdom, the good old lady might have peacefully passed away before he could possibly have reached her, and all who can enter into a bashful young Englishman's reluctance to face a formidable scene will make allowances for Tom. He did hate the thought of driving up to Mrs. Hilary's house in a station fly, with perhaps another fly on in front—or behind—containing another expectant legatee, and of being received by intelligent servants, perfectly aware of what these arrivals meant. Would he and the other legatee have to intro-

duce themselves to each other, and eat, drink, and smoke together afterwards? Would they be alone, or would there be a phalanx of legates already in possession? What, again, would they think of his droll appearance? He could explain, of course: but would not the very explanation raise secret surmises? It would look as if he had indeed been in a violent hurry to come. Added to which Bowdler's coat and Bowdler's breeches were hardly becoming.

And he grew tired, and hungry, and stiff as the night wore on; the night had begun for him so very soon. In the morning, it must be remembered, he had had his first skate of the season, and he had skated indefatigably. Then there had been the trudge over rough, frosted ground, hard as iron, together with the weight of a heavy gun to carry. He would have been pleasurably fatigued even if he had been at home, while as it was, between the hurry-skurry of departure and the succeeding irksome hours of blankness, he was at a low ebb altogether when he stepped out on the little platform of the station for Pine Ridge.

The first sense of relief was obtained by perceiving himself to be the only passenger, at least the only one of his own kind. That was something, even supposing there was a phalanx already gathered in the house; they were not flocking thither in company with him. When it appeared that there was no phalanx as well as no second station fly, the relief was so great that Tom was almost happy.

No one had been telegraphed for but himself; the glowing fire, the tempting supper table, the attention, and respect, and commiseration were for himself alone; he had no need to mind about his clothes and his absence of luggage; to Mrs. Hilary's gentle old manservant he could make his explanations with ease; and the tender solicitation of the old man for his comfort, and the excellence of the food and wine, sent little thrills of comfort all through his weary frame.

He did not even want to smoke, he only wanted to go to bed when assured that he was not expected in the sick chamber. Mrs. Hilary was aware he had come, and the nurse fancied her gratified by the intelligence, but at night

her mind was apt to grow confused, and an exciting interview was not to be thought of. "She'll only just know you, sir; and really for all her senses can follow in what she says, it was hardly worth sending," commented the oracle when delivering her dictum on the subject; "but as I distinctly understood her to repeat your name and to add 'Send for him' over and over again, I sent. We always do send when patients are like that. But I'm sorry you had such a dreadful night to travel on, sir." Even she was sorry! Tom, who loved sympathy, grew himself quite light-hearted over his hardships.

"Oh, it's nothing—nothing at all," he said. "I was lucky—that is, I—I just got the telegram in time to catch the train. Of course it was all right to send for me."

For the life of him he could not help feeling even more relieved than before. Until now he hardly knew how much he had dreaded the thought of having to sit up by Mrs. Hilary's bed, holding her hand, and hearing how she had made her will. What should he say about it? He had thanked her before, and he thanked

her now again in his heart—but he did not want explanations.

To be told that she would only just know him, and that his being sent for was merely to satisfy an instinctive craving, might have made a young man who had undergone something and given up something at duty's call, impatient—but it soothed Tom Barnet's shrinking soul in a wonderful manner. He went off to bed quite cheerfully.

And then he found himself in a room which was comfort personified, with every little arrangement strictly attended to, and the fire-light dancing over all; and as he mounted the huge bedside and sank beneath the coverlet which wrapped him round, and felt the warmed sheets beneath, and laid his cheek upon a fine old linen pillow, he had scarcely a moment to realise how inexpressibly grateful to every sense it all was, before his eyelids closed in a long, dreamless sleep.

The next morning dawned not, as at Duck-hill, in storm and hail, but bright with sunshine; and the first outlook over a peaceful snow-veiled landscape was further re-assuring.

The sun was high in the heavens, it was between ten and eleven o'clock when Tom awoke, and it was the church bells chiming across the snow which awakened him. A country church with a fine peal of bells was within a couple of miles, and in the frosty atmosphere their music sounded loud and sweet to the ear.

Tom, however, started up, as though caught tripping. "By Jove, that's the church bells," cried he, as soon as his head cleared. "How I must have slept! But after all, it was midnight before I got to bed and I was most uncommonly tired. Well, there's no hurry, I suppose," mused he, comfortably settling down again; "there's nobody waiting for me, and I may breakfast when I choose."

It was nearly noon when he did choose. The little old serving man begged him not to rise till he felt so inclined; was sure he must have been in need of a good rest; and had no news to give of his mistress. She was much the same, half awake, half asleep. The nurse thought it best to wait till she mentioned Mr. Barnet's name again, when she would suggest his going up to the bedroom.

“All right,” said Tom, drowsily. Then he napped on for about half an hour, and woke more fully because the sun had crept on to his face and persistently remained there. After this he got up.

Whether he knew it or not, it was a cheery breakfast he made in the poor old lady’s house. He did not feel lonely—far from it. Old Cuthbert was in and out all the time with his gentle cough and apt ministrations. The coffee was delicious, the home-made bread better than any bread they made at Duckhill—(he took a mental note of this with a view to reform)—and the honey in the comb a worthy finish to broiled fish and devilled kidneys. As he sat there peacefully eating and drinking and playing with the cat, Mrs. Hilary’s favourite cat, at intervals, while the whole square, old-fashioned dining parlour was flooded with broad sunlight, Tom Barnet had not a care in the world. His eyes roved round the well-covered walls, rested on the tall screen, the rows of leather-backed chairs, the antique sideboard, and massively set out table. “I suppose they would get the china too,” he murmured.

The future of his three sisters began to take shape in his mind.

“If Ida and I are both settled by the spring,” thought he—(how amazed Ida would have been had she heard!)—“the little ones could either be with her or with me. Margaret is such a dear girl that it might answer for them to stay on at Duckhill, but I expect they would rather be with Ida. It *is* luck for Ida. The very place for her and Maurice. A nice small estate, in good working order; a good house, and needing nothing—that is, if she gets it as it stands. But, of course, one ought not to build upon this,” shaking his head wisely; “we have no right to draw conclusions, because, of course, nothing exact was stated. Still, she would hardly have sent for me——” and he looked complacently round.

Now, who was this Margaret, thus familiarly quoted? Tom seemed to know all about her; why has she never before appeared in these pages, nor been referred to by our speakers? Simply because, as yet, the most of them knew nothing about Margaret. They knew there was such a person—they had no idea

that such a person knew a great deal about them.

“Don’t you see what a cruel thing it would be to break it all up just when the whole arrangement is beginning to work so nicely?” said Margaret to a lover who had been impetuous for the first time in his life. “If you had not happened to fall in love with me, you would have been quite happy at home with those dear sisters of yours; and you know how they have talked about their new, *old* home, and how they have been hungering and thirsting to get back to it! Tom, let them have this one year in peace. I am young too, and my dear parents dislike the idea of my being married before I am twenty. Wait till I am twenty—it won’t be long—and see if nothing happens first. Ida is older than I, and ever so much prettier. She may have a home of her own to go to——”

“Or Pine Ridge,” Tom had thought.

But he had not communicated Mrs. Hilary’s intentions to his sweetheart, for the same reason that he had held his tongue about them to the rest. He knew his spirited trio at home; they

would never be driven, and Mrs. Hilary might seek to drive them. Thence would have ensued altercations and misery. As Margaret bade him, he would bide his time. But it may as well be owned, without shame to human nature, that Maurice Stafford would never have received his prolonged invitation, if there had not been something in the mind of his host which neither he nor any of the others present suspected.

Now the fates seemed working for Tom. He foresaw for Ida not only a husband, but a home — an extra home that was — supposing Stafford had none in particular to offer. With Ida happily wedded, and himself happily—oh, how happily wedded too—Jenny and Louie could not fail to be provided for. He would take care they did not fall between two stools. Martinet as he was, and as Ida was, no one else should tyrannise over the poor little things; while as for Margaret—his eyes grew soft only to think of Margaret.

He took out her last letter from his breast pocket. It had arrived on the morning of the day before. Regularly every Saturday morn-

ing there made its appearance at Duckhill Manor the small, square envelope which meant so much to one inmate of the house, and which had hitherto escaped the notice of the rest; and not without a swift recollection that no more of the kind were due for another week had Tom placed his correspondence in Ida's hands on his departure.

He now absorbed anew the contents of Margaret's latest sheet.

The door opened.

"Well, Cuthbert?" said Tom, expectantly.

The old man shook his head. The muscles of his face were working feebly.

"Any change? Anything—ah—wrong?" cried Tom.

"All is wrong, sir; that is, all is over," and holding on by a chair with an endeavour to control his agitation, the old butler proceeded. "She's gone, sir. The nurse has just come out to say so. Passed away a few minutes ago. And no one with her—that is, not you, sir, nor me. If we had been called——"

—"Oh, well, you see, there was no time to call us." Although startled and impressed, the

young man naturally felt less emotion than the old retainer. "I am sure the nurse would have come if she could," he went on. "I presume she had no idea the end was so near. There is the doctor's gig," catching sight of it from the window with a sense of relief. "I'll go and meet him, Cuthbert," putting a hand on the bent shoulder as he passed. "This has come upon you very suddenly; go and get—composed," continued Tom, trying to say the right thing. "I'll answer the door bell," and he vanished.

Everyone now turned to Tom for advice, direction, and approbation. By common consent he found himself looked upon as the new master, and his time was much more fully occupied than it would have been had the old lady lived longer. So busy, indeed, did he find himself, and so obvious was it that his presence was as necessary as it was decorous and, so to speak, dutiful, that he ever afterwards looked back upon the days spent at Pine Ridge in that snowy, sunny seclusion, which was yet so full of occupation, so pregnant with results, with a keen perception of its having been a pleasant season—

Then he had no ill news from home to take off the edge. Nothing had been written to him about Beech Farm, nor about Maurice Stafford. He supposed all was right in both instances.

As regarded Beech Farm it was so — no thanks to Ida, nor yet to Trusty—but Maurice Stafford had left Duckhill some days before its master returned thither.

CHAPTER XVI.

A HOME-COMING MARRED.

“GONE!” exclaimed Tom Barnet on his arrival back at his own home the following Saturday night. “Maurice Stafford gone! How? When? Why was I not told? Why——,” but here the speaker paused.

He had stayed till Saturday at Pine Ridge, there being so much to do and attend to. Everything had been left to his sisters; with the exception of a few legacies, just and liberal, which Tom had announced with much decorous satisfaction; and he had had the pleasure of hearing in return that it had for long been understood in the household that the property would pass intact to the Barnet family; and that although Mrs. Hilary had relations on the other side, they were wealthy and independent people, to whom all she could give or leave was a matter of little consequence. Some of

these cousins attended the funeral, made themselves pleasant, and promised to shoot the Duckhill woods the following autumn.

Contrary to custom, moreover, the old lady's affairs proved to be in perfect order. She had lived well within her income, kept her own accounts, and been lucky in her investments. Tom's respect for the sex was hugely increased after going through the papers which his position as executor necessitated his investigating.

Whilst engaged thus congenially, even his own interests and those of Duckhill generally sank into the background; and though he opened every sheet with a certain amount of expectation—especially when the address was in the handwriting of his sister Ida—he did not detect anything amiss in the absence of Maurice Stafford's name.

If Maurice had not come forward as an avowed suitor, it only meant that he had judged it better to wait for the return of the elder brother and natural guardian, but if on the other hand Maurice had spoken—"And somehow I think he must have spoken," meditated the absentee over his leisurely evening

pipe, there being still no news, though several days had passed,)—the two might choose to keep their secret to themselves, till such time as they could confide it face to face.

It was like Ida not to care to write about such things. Ida was shy where feelings were concerned—as he was himself. How Ida would start when she heard about Margaret! Ida who knew him so well and yet knew him not at all, as Margaret did! Was it now Ida's turn to experience something of that wonderful overflow of soft emotions and tender, sacred aspirations, which made him in the presence of his betrothed another creature from the prosaic Tom Barnet of every-day life? He wondered.

Of course Maurice Stafford was a good fellow, an awfully good fellow; and Ida was a dear good girl, and a girl to admire too; but still—he shook his head. No young lover ever thinks that another can know anything of his own heaven.

Nothing, however, Tom considered, could be more *à propos* than Maurice Stafford's being actually at Duckhill and in love with his sis-

ter, when that sister was being put in possession of a home and fortune. Maurice would be clear of all suspicion of fortune-hunting, since both the old lady's illness and death had been totally unforeseen, and since no one, save Tom himself, had any notion to what extent the Barnet girls would benefit thereby.

If on his return to the Manor it should be found that the first action required of him was to give his brotherly consent to an engagement already half formed, well and good. He would rather prefer that it should be so. But if the set words had not so far been actually spoken, he would wait till they had—it would not be long—before making his important announcement on the other hand.

When he thought of his announcement, he chuckled. If Miss Barnet had been reticent, so had he. He had heard from all three sisters, and no one of them had named the name of Maurice—(a prohibition had been issued on the subject, we may guess by whom)—wherefore they could not complain if he had also written briefly and vaguely, suppressing the gist of his communications.

At first, indeed, he had dashed off a line or two, in which he had conveyed the news; but on second thoughts the sheet had been destroyed; and subsequently he had merely lamented the delay occasioned by business, without saying whose business. It would be easier in every way to tell than to write.

There was so much to tell, seeing that one tale opened the way for another. He might at last even venture upon his own autobiographical narration—indeed, he would almost have to do so in order to re-assure the affectionate hearts of the three most concerned. They would think it impossible to desert him: cruel to leave Duckhill for Pine Ridge.

In fancy he heard little Louie's outcry, and saw the tears in Jenny's eyes. Poor, dear, little tender-hearted things, perhaps they would not even care to go when they heard the whole truth; and it might be difficult to make them easy in their minds, albeit there was a Margaret in the question. Ah, but not when they came to know his Margaret!

He selected the words in which he should first present his Margaret to them in the light

of a sister, and make known her own entreaty on their behalf. "Let them have this one winter in peace."

"It is Ida herself who has broken the peace," he heard himself saying. "I give you my word, if Ida had stood firm, so would I, till a year had passed. Pine Ridge should not have separated us. But now the whole compact is at an end. After all, you know," this was for the two younger ones, "after all, it only amounts to this, you have two homes instead of one. (For I suppose Maurice would make no objection," murmured the young man, to himself, in conclusion.)

It had been a great point in Maurice's favour, that he was not the sort of man to make objection. "Anyway, they can't go wrong between us," thought Tom, cheerfully, "and there's no hurry, as Margaret won't hear of anything being said until the spring. The spring? That's April. That would be just right. I can make Maurice hang out for April too." And thus peacefully smoking and ruminating, he found the quiet evenings pass as quickly as the busy mornings.

Conceive therefore the sensations of the young squire when he looked round in vain for the figure which should have been prominent in the group assembled to welcome him on his return.

There were his aunts, his uncles, and his cousins of both sexes; there were his sisters three—Ida with a slight scar on her left cheek, but in other respects none the worse for the accident which, be it noted, had taken place the day brother left—but there was no Maurice Stafford.

The hour was late; it was pitch dark outside; Stafford must be in the house if he were anywhere; and if in the house why was he not either in the hall or drawing-room?

“Awfully glad you’re all here,” said Tom, beaming round. “It was most awfully unfortunate, wasn’t it? But as you can stop for Christmas it’s all right. Awfully glad you can stop, aunt Bess. Where’s Stafford?” He thought he put the question easily, but Ida perceived the dawning of surprise.

“Oh, Maurice is gone,” replied Jenny, trying not to glance at her sister—Ida was giving

particular orders about the cold roast pheasant for the traveller's supper, at the moment.

"Yes, Maurice is gone," echoed little Louie, with a sigh. "We were so sorry—all of us—but he would go. Ida said we weren't to tell you——"

"There was no need to trouble you about every trifle," Ida's ringing voice interrupted the plaintive tones. "Mr. Stafford could not have stayed all this time, at any rate, Tom; and we could not tell when you would be free to come back. It was better to let him go."

"Gone!" exclaimed Tom. It was at this point that he gave vent to the lively expressions of astonishment and dismay above recorded. "How? When? Why was I not told?"

"You had enough to think about. There was no use troubling you." The speaker had enacted the scene in her mind over and over again, and had resolved upon her own part.

"Troubling me!" echoed Tom, standing still to look at her. "Troubling me? I don't understand. How should it 'trouble me'?"

Ida bit her lip. She had not meant the phrase to be interpreted thus.

And Tom had so little tact. If she did not manage to convey to him that for some particular reason she wished no more said on the matter, he would pursue it tooth and nail, even under the very noses of inquisitive uncles, aunts, and cousins. He was capable of following her all about the large drawing-room, inquiring and protesting.

She could depend upon Tom if once he perceived anything amiss, but how convey to him the hint? No sort of movement, in the shape of a pinch, or a subterranean kick—inelegant but effective—was possible, and equally impossible was a frown, or warning glance. She was beneath a fire of watchful eyes, and it seemed to her as though, in the silence around, she read the hush of expectation.

The poor girl knew not what to do. She had not reckoned on such a passionate protest, having considered that the newly-arrived traveller would be taken up with other things, his home-coming, his guests, his letters—she had provided herself with a pile of business letters

which she now thrust into his hand—and beforehand it had seemed as if she should easily dispose of Maurice Stafford's absence.

But here was Tom, her usually calm and discreet brother, belabouring them all with angry questions and obvious condemnation. His tone, his air, and whole unconcealed discomfiture meant, "What have you all been about to let this man go?" and that so much was understood by most of the party was plain.

"I am sure, dear Tom, neither your uncle nor I thought that it signified—I mean that appearances signified—we are not great people for etiquette," protested Mrs. Lytton, who was the first to find voice, "it was of course a *little* awkward, you and dear Ida both being absent—Ida had to keep her room, you know, for three whole days—but then we all knew so exactly how it was, that really, really we thought—I am sure your uncle and I thought—and indeed I believe we all did—" looking round for confirmation of the statement, "that Mr. Stafford need not have gone."

"Why, of course it *was* unusual; of course I

know that, aunt Bess," the young man's brow began to clear, "but then, as you say, the circumstances were patent to everybody. I particularly begged that everybody would stay on, when I wrote up from the post-office that night—you know I did, Ida," turning to her, "and I repeated it in every letter since. Did you not tell Maurice what I said?"

A terrible question. It was revealed to nearly all present in one and the same instant that Tom had put a terrible question; and the little boys alone unconcernedly waited for a reply. None came: like a tortured creature which can make no moan, Ida drew in a long, slow breath and her lips slightly trembled, as she pressed them close,—but no words escaped. Then Tom perceived what he was doing.

"Oh, well, if he had to go, he had to go," cried he, making a movement towards breaking up the group. "I'm disappointed, because he is such a good fellow, and a good shot; and now that the open weather has come back, we might have made some good bags—but it can't be helped. You can't force a man to stay against his will, can you, uncle Jack? I'm

only glad you did not all bolt off too, the moment my back was turned," trying hard for his first cheery note. "It's all right about Beech Farm anyhow, Ida."

"Is it?" replied she, indifferently. Yet she appreciated her brother's effort, and would fain have seconded him better.

"Mr. Trusty has him fast—I mean Hodgson—but I haven't heard the particulars; and I don't quite understand why any one needed to go up to London. Hodgson wrote on Saturday." And he entered into one of the disquisitions which were such gall and wormwood to General Thistleblow.

In the present instance, however, the lengthiest discourse and the drowsiest topic was the best for the purpose.

In reality Tom was as eager to put an end to the scene, and break up the party, as was his sister. He was now aroused, alert, keenly suspicious, and profoundly disgusted. Something had gone wrong because he was not there to keep all right; and when he thought of the future that hung upon this "going wrong," he had scarce patience to get through his cold

pheasant, and waved aside every other dish on the supper table. He must get Ida to himself if it were but for a few minutes, before her door was bolted for the night.

As a matter of fact, it was bolted when he tapped; but he heard steps approach within, and knew he should not be sent away.

“I thought you would come,” said Ida.

Then she walked to the mantelpiece, as though expecting him to follow, and he saw her take down some letters which had been ranged in front of the little clock. Five minutes before, the letters had been placed there. Usually, they were kept under lock and key.

But Tom was expected, and everything was ready for him, though a barred entrance meant “No admission” to other visitors.

“Sit down,” said Ida, handing her brother three open envelopes. “I daresay you will blame me, Tom, and I don’t know that I have acted honourably; but I just felt I *had* to do it. I have opened and read two of your letters which were not meant for me—at least they

were meant for me, but not for me to open. There was nothing in them that I, as a woman, might not read," blushing deeply, "because they only say in other language what my correspondent (this is my own letter," indicating with her finger), "also says. Are you following me, Tom?"

"I don't exactly understand, you know," said Tom, slowly. "You ought not to go and open my letters, you know."

"It was you yourself who told me to open them."

"Oh—ah—yes, I forgot. Because of the farm. But then, you need not have read them if they were not about the farm."

"No, I need not—but I did. Shall I tell you why? I saw a name—" she paused.

"Was it Stafford's name?" said Tom, abruptly. Usually he spoke of "Maurice," but he did not feel inclined to say "Maurice" at the moment.

His sister's face was averted from him. She made no answer, only nodded her head.

"Was that why he left?" It was full half a minute before he put the question.

“Yes.” The husky whisper just reached his ear.

“Let me see the letters,” said Tom, holding out his hand. “You say one was for you, and two were for me. Did they all come together, or how?”

“One of yours—that one—from Colonel Jessop——”

“From Colonel Jessop?”

“It came the day you left. It was in the post-bag which you missed.”

“Ha? And it was among those letters which I told you to look through?”

“Yes. But I had my own first.”

“And who was yours from?”

“Lady Sophia Clarke. Oh, Tom, such a letter! Such a mean, spiteful, malingering letter! You know how she liked Mr. Stafford? You know how she used to beckon him to sit by her, and make him talk to her, and how she tried to get him away with her? Now she says that ‘with real regret’ and all sorts of hypocritical expressions, she hears he is still staying on here, and—and a great deal more.”

“What does she mean by that?”

“She makes out that he is a—a—bad man.”

“Oh, she makes out that, does she?”

“I see you despise her as I did—do; but Tom, it will not do—to—we cannot despise Sir Robert.”

“Sir Robert? Is he in it too?”

“Oh, yes, and Colonel Jessop, and General Thistleblow,” said Ida, with a little hysterical laugh, “they are all in it, everyone of them. Read your letters, and you will see. That last, from General Thistleblow, only came this morning.”

“Look here, Ida, before I start on them, I want to ask you one thing.”

There was an instantaneous hush of Ida's laugh. She guessed what was coming.

“Did Maurice Stafford ask you to marry him?” said Tom, in his plain way. “I had rather hear that first, before I look at these letters.”

“No, he did not. But,” said Ida, turning her head aside, and nervously clasping and unclasping her hands as she spoke, “I did not

give him the chance. Tom, did you think I would, when I knew——”

“Oh, you knew?”

“I knew enough. I had read Lady Sophia’s note——”

“One drop of the poison—yes?”

“Before he came in that day. He had asked to see me before he went shooting with you.”

“Oh, he had?”

“And I had promised to—to let him come to the boudoir. There was no harm in it, Tom. I—he—you know how it was, Tom——”

“I know—yes.”

“I thought I might,” continued poor Ida, making her simple confession with downcast eyes and burning brow, “and I waited for him so long,” suddenly there was the sound of a low sob. “I waited and waited; but he—he——” she could not go on.

“Did he not come?”

“Not till too late.”

“What did he say for himself?”

“Nothing—for I never saw him.”

“What did you do, Ida? Tell me exactly,

if you can. Don't mind telling me, you know. I—I may have something to tell you, by-and-by."

Then Ida narrated all that the reader has already heard and a little more, which will presently be made known.

CHAPTER XVII.

"I HAD TO DO MY DUTY," SAID TOM.

"THEN you actually turned him out of the house?" said Tom, at last.

"I suppose I did."

"He will never forgive you, Ida."

"Why should he forgive me? It is I who have something to forgive, not Mr. Stafford."

Tom looked at his sister curiously. "Are you sure of that?" he inquired.

"If I could have doubted;" there was a world of pain in the girl's voice; "don't you think I would have done it? Don't you think I would have been glad to do it? Again and again I almost went back to the boudoir; I had my hand upon the door handle, and—I stopped in time; Tom, why do you look at me like that?"

"You women are strange creatures. If you

had been a man you would have had it out with Maurice."

"How could I have it out? What could I say? I could not go to him with these letters and say, 'See how our friends have found you out. You could deceive us poor simpletons because we are young and foolish, and trusted you; but you cannot prevent the world's knowing you for what you are. Get you gone.' That was what I ought to have said if I had spoken at all. It was easiest to hold my peace."

"And condemn a man unheard."

"There are some things which are best left unheard."

"A man should always be heard in his own defence."

"Yes—by a man. A woman can't either speak, or hear, until——"

"Until when?" said Tom, as she stopped short.

"Until she has the right," replied his sister, in a low voice. "Mr. Stafford had given me no right."

"Poor fellow, luck was dead against him,"

rejoined Tom, with a smile. "If only I had been here! This has been a queer business altogether. I have some queer things to tell you. Several monstrous queer things. So many that, 'pon my word, I—I hardly know where to begin. It's awfully late," glancing at the clock.

"Oh, never mind that." So many times recently had that little timepiece been consulted, and always because some sad, lonely hour had had to be dragged through, or because another must needs be anticipated with dread and reluctance, that Ida had almost come to hate the sight of its bright face, and the sound of its cheerful tick. But something in her brother's tone caused a new sensation in her breast; she had not expected to be upbraided, and the reproachful accents fell like balm upon her open wound.

"The fact is," quoth Tom, sententiously, "you have been hasty, Ida."

"Hasty?"

"I don't say that, all things considered, it is not as well that Maurice Stafford took himself off, but it was a pity you made him do it."

“You think it was as well he went?” A pang shot through her heart.

“Considering that you had those letters, it might have been awkward for you if he had stayed, since I was not here to——”

“To do what? Do get on. Do please talk a little faster. What could you have done? What good would your being here have been?”

“It happens that I, too, have some letters to show.” He pulled out a pocket-book.

“People think I’m only a young fool,” he said, “and, of course, I don’t know much. But I’m not quite such an ass as General Thistleblow takes me for. I might not have thought of making inquiries about Stafford, if he had only been down for a week’s shooting—I mean making close inquiries. I took it for granted that he could shoot here as he had shot at Lady De Rigueur’s, she having also girls about, and being a particular woman, who knows the world; but you don’t suppose, Ida, that I am such an absolute idiot as to see a man making love to my sister, and getting encouragement from her, without informing myself as to who and what he is? ’Pon my word, I am greatly

obliged to my friends for their opinion of me. And you too; I should have thought you girls might have known me better—you, Ida, at least. It seems I'm not fit to be trusted with the care of my own sisters——”

“Tom, what is—all this—about?” The broken words made themselves just audible.

“Here are my letters,” said Tom, still trying hard to be injured and indignant. “Which will you see first? The one from the colonel of his regiment, the other from my college chum, who turns out to be his nearest neighbour at home?”

Ida took the letters. “You wrote to them?” she murmured in awe-stricken accents. “But, Tom—how—why—when did you write? Tom, what made you write?”

“Girls like you do not understand such things.” Tom stuck out his chin; he was immensely pleased with himself now. “It is for the men of the family to take precautions when they see rocks ahead. I had hardly invited Maurice to stay on behind the others, before I began to perceive why he was willing to stay; and I wrote straight off, first to Mellor, who by

good luck had been mentioned the same day—you remember his telling us he knew Mellor?—and then to Colonel Wallace.”

“But, Tom, why did you not tell me?”

“These are the sort of things men don’t tell,” said Tom, loftily.

“But, Tom—oh, Tom—it is all so strange, Tom.” There was a new ring of hope even in the speaker’s doubtful tones. “Was it—was it quite the right thing to do to make inquiries about our own guest, the man staying in our house?”

“The right thing” appealed to Tom at once. “Ah, there you are; now I agree with you,” said he patronisingly: “you are perfectly correct there; it would not have been the right thing at all in an ordinary case, but this was not an ordinary case. I had to do my duty. I have got to take care of all you, my sisters, and if a young fellow begins making up to you——”

“But ought you not to have waited till——”

“Certainly not. That would have been the old dodge of shutting the stable door after the horse was stolen. I did not want you to be hankering after Maurice——”

“But how did you explain it to these men?”

“Oh, I told them the truth.”

“What did you say?” All of this was rather dreadful to poor Ida. “How did you put it? Did you say that—that he was here—and that we had—had asked him to stay on?”

“Never you mind what I said.” (“Good Lord, it would never do to tell her!” ejaculated Tom, inwardly.) “You read what they say, and that ought to be enough for you. It will be enough for old Thistleblow, too, or I am mistaken. He has sprung a mare’s nest. It’s the wrong man he has got hold of—and Jessop too.”

“But Lady Sophia?—Sir Robert?” murmured Ida.

The whole pack has opened cry on the same false scent,” said Tom, with intense satisfaction, “and we’ll make them hold their tails down—see if we don’t. I am only sorry you let Maurice go away. It would have been such a score to have announced the engagement!”

Ida turned away her head. A score? Oh, if Tom only knew. She had softened the matter to Tom, had missed out sundry details, and smoothed the outline of others. In reality she had made it impossible for her lover to remain, and had flatly refused him the interview he had begged for. There had been divers communications, and the final stroke had been delivered thus. Ida had penned a careful line in which, with a formality of which she had once believed herself incapable, she had deeply regretted that Mr. Stafford should have had such an unpleasant termination to his visit, but had informed him that as she did not expect her brother to return for some days, it would be a pity he should lose the sport he might be having elsewhere by waiting on at Duckhill.

The little note had been handed to Maurice on Sunday afternoon; he had gone straight to his room, packed his things, and left by the night train—the train he had previously recommended to Mr. Trusty, the bailiff.

A second time Ida had felt as if her dictum had been forestalled. She had not intended Mr. Stafford to leave till next day. She now

opened the envelopes in her hand with shaking fingers.

"You know he did have to leave his regiment," she murmured. "He himself told us that."

"Gospel truth. But see what his colonel has to say to it."

"And he did have to leave Oxford, too."

"Have to leave Oxford? How could he have to leave Oxford when he was in the service at the time?"

"I suppose it was before he went into the army."

"It was nothing of the kind; it was—the leaving Oxford was—at the same time; *a* Stafford had to leave Oxford, and because he had, another Stafford had to leave his regiment."

"Tom, what do you mean?"

Tom nodded at the colonel's letter, and then at last his sister read it. It did not escape her that the word "Private" was very distinctly written and underlined at the top of the sheet. Scattered over the pages were one or two more emphatically underlined phrases. The closing sentence, however, is all that we need give our

readers. "I have the greatest possible regard for Stafford, and no one regretted his loss more than I did; though, of course, being a family affair, I could not see it my place to interfere."

"That is something of a testimony, isn't it?" quoth Tom, eyeing the reader triumphantly. "I think it will blow these great guns in town pretty well to pieces, won't it? But now, you read the other, the one from Mellor. His people have known Stafford's people for years. I couldn't have applied to a better man. You read what he says: it is even better—at least he seems to know more about it all than Colonel Wallace—of course, though, to have the word of the colonel of his regiment is a greater score. Now, you read Mellor."

Thus adjured, she read Mellor.

"I don't know a better fellow going than Maurice Stafford," thus ran the note after the preliminary sentence, "nor a more offensive young scapegrace than his brother Ted. Not content with all sorts of respectable debts, he has been borrowing money from highways and byways objectionable to name. The poor old

dad, not over well off, and shaky in his health, is almost heart-broken; and it was to relieve him and save their good name that the eldest son gave up his commission. His regiment was too expensive; and, besides, he was wanted at home to look after the young one. The young one was getting mixed up with a woman in the neighbourhood—the old story. However, I hear there is a chance of shipping him off to the antipodes, and sincerely hope it may be true. He is an ungrateful cub, too, for when caught in a gambling den, half fuddled, and covered with slips of paper, he had the cheek to give his name as ‘Maurice.’ Rather good, I must own, and Maurice himself laughed at it. He is one of those good-natured souls who takes life easy, and when it was suggested that it might be awkward if it got about, he only laughed again. Perhaps you may have heard this story, and confounded the two brothers, as you ask me so particularly as to character? If so, set your mind at rest. There are any number of us to swear to Maurice Stafford’s character.”

“There now, you see,” began Tom, perceiv-

ing that the last line of the sheet had been reached, "you see—oh, I say," with sudden perception, "I'm awfully sorry, you know, Ida—never mind—it will be all right yet. You could not tell what you were doing, you know." She had hidden her face, but he saw that she was weeping. "It's a great deal better this way than if it had been the other, isn't it now?" said Tom, jogging her elbow gently by way of sympathy; "and I say, Ida, listen," putting his mouth close to her ear, "listen to this. I have got something to tell you that I know you will be glad to hear—something about myself. I am—in the same way myself—that's what it is. And—and—if all goes well we'll have a double wedding in the spring."

Then he told her all.

* * * * *

A very quiet Sunday passed. Whatever might be the tumultuous sensations at work within the breasts of some of the party, there was no token visible to the outward eye. The observances of the day were kept with the

strict attention always exacted at Duckhill. There were the usual large, cheerful gatherings for meals, and the leisurely rambling hither and thither between whiles, which obtains in many such quiet country houses.

A long visit was paid to the stables, and another to the kennels; there was an inspection of some damage done by the frost; and advice was given and taken regarding certain out-door repairs under discussion. In the afternoon a brisk walk was proposed.

Rather to the surprise of his uncles and cousins, Tom, who usually headed the walking party, did not put on his coat, though he was careful to assure everybody that the lanes were quite passable, and that there would be no more rain that day. He was going up to sit with Ida, he said.

“To sit with Ida!” repeated Maud to her sister, when she heard this. “Not over polite to us, I must own. He has been away the whole week, and the very day after he gets back he shirks us all to go and sit with Ida!”

Mrs. Lytton, however, took another view of the case. “Just like dear Tom,” murmured

she ; “ he has waited till now to hear what Ida has been doing to Maurice Stafford. Now we shall hear at last. Something, of course, must have taken place, or Mr. Stafford would never have gone off as he did. And Ida had evidently kept it back from Tom. I would not disturb them for the world—not for the world. I will only just lie in wait to catch Tom as he comes downstairs, and if no one interrupts us, as we were interrupted before, he will be sure to tell me everything.”

She set the library door ajar and sat facing it, with a book of sermons on her lap.

After an hour's silence, a movement on the upper landing was heard.

“ Now for it ! ” concluded aunt Bess, joyfully, “ now he will come downstairs, and just as he reaches the lower steps, I will stroll out quite naturally, and ask him to take a turn outside. The sun is shining, and one ought not to miss a whole afternoon ”—shutting her book—“ a little turn in the garden ”—and she was never destined to have it, for Tom never descended the staircase !

It was quite true that he had left his sister ;

true also that his steps had been heard upon the landing; but he had turned down his own passage, and retreated into his own chamber. He had work on hand.

“It must seem most uncommonly rude to you,” said he, an hour later, “but the fact is, if I don’t go to town to-night, I should be away three days, whereas if I leave at nine I can get back on Tuesday to breakfast. But really I don’t know what to say to you all. Of course nothing but business——”

“If it’s business, Tom, there is no more to be said.” Tom blessed the speaker in his heart. “Business,” continued uncle Jack in his wisest accents, “business before everything. You did a mighty good stroke of business when you ran away last week——”

“My dear John!” A wifely remonstrance nipped the plain dealer at this point.

“Eh? Well? Well, of course Tom knows what I mean,” said he, somewhat abashed. “I forgot what the precise circumstances were. You need not all look at me like that,” growing testy under reproving glances. “I tell you I forgot. But business is business, and I stand

by the man who puts it first. Go it, Tom, my boy. Go about your business—eh? What? Ha, ha, ha! That was not bad, was it, Charlie? Did you hear that, Harry? He is to ‘go about his business,’ eh? Ha!” rubbing his hands with the exultation of a man who has had a jest thrown at him, and has only needed to stoop and pick it up.

The rest of the party, however, were not so complaisant; it did seem as if their host could have remained at home for a day or two at least, before rushing off again. Maud began to rally him.

“It does not look as if you valued our society very much, I must own, sir,” cried she. “We all know what men mean when they plead business. You are longing for a run to town——”

“And two cold night journeys.”

“Oh, night journeys are nothing. Men prefer them. There was Mr. Stafford: this day week he vaulted off just in the same fashion; ‘business’ called him. I wager he had never thought of the business till an hour before he started! Not one word of

it did we hear till he was in the act of departure."

"You are quite right," said Tom, coolly. "He had not thought of it, but as one man would not go, another did. My bailiff, old Trusty, a good soul but narrow-minded, objected to travelling on Sunday night, though he knew it was important to see a tenant I had in prospect for one of my best farms on Monday morning; and Maurice Stafford went in his place. That is to say, I don't mean that he would have gone at any rate, but as he could not very well remain on here without me, he concluded to do me a good turn at the same time. He got me my tenant."

"But you did not know he had gone?"

"I knew nothing about it till I saw Trusty just now. I am hoping—ah—to see Stafford to-morrow, and—ah—thank him."

CHAPTER XVIII.

BREAKFAST AT A CLUB.

“A YOUNG gentleman has been inquiring for you, sir.”

In spite of an incipient moustache carefully cultivated, Tom Barnet had not yet succeeded in being simply styled “a gentleman” by club waiters. To their experienced eyes, youth was depicted on every curve of his smooth cheek and every movement of his lithe, supple frame; and this was especially distinguishable within the solemn portals frequented by General Thistleblow, a club sacred to maturity, and seldom invaded by the rising generation. Its members were apt to get stiffly out of their chairs, and move off with uneven tread until the old joints warmed up, and worked more easily. Stairs were much disliked. Even the entrance steps were taken slowly, and occasionally sideways. It was not unusual for short exclama-

tions such as "Ah!" and "Oh!" to be heard when great-coats were being pulled off or put on. Assistants were expected to be very handy and gentle. One man had been dismissed because he had a rough touch.

In this calm retreat one could grow older and older almost without knowing it; and though it was years since General Thistleblow and Colonel Jessop had been balloted in, and they had lost much hair and gained many wrinkles in the interim, neither was conscious of decay, and each would have stoutly maintained himself as good a man in all essentials as when he first entered his name in the club book.

The one thing which marred this illusion was the presence of younger fellows; fellows who were joining at the same age they had been when they joined; and yet who were not young fellows as the world called young. On them would bitter looks be cast, and at them would innuendoes be levelled; whereas the very young did not so jar upon the nerves; they were "boys," mere "boys;" they knew nothing, had seen nothing; like young bears

they had "all their troubles before them." In consequence they could be pitied, and endured.

It was this pitying attitude of General Thistleblow towards himself which penetrated more deeply beneath the stolid exterior of Tom Barnett than anything else could have done. He had no notion that much of it was assumed; that his quondam guardian in reality stood in considerable awe and fear of himself; nor that while he was eager to show himself no fool to General Thistleblow, General Thistleblow was doing him the honour to be just as anxious to prove him one.

Thistleblow had been somewhat surprised at receiving no reply to his note despatched to Duckhill on the previous Friday, when he inspected his letters on Monday morning. He had written Tom Barnett a "facer," he thought, and Tom was not the man to receive a "facer" in silence. Some sort of an answer back might have been counted on; yet here were all the mails in—it was nearly noon, and he was just going to breakfast—and no word from Duckhill.

"Snowed up, or rained up, or frozen in, per-

haps?" muttered he, with a grin. "The snow and frost has departed from every other part of the country, but I'll be bound it holds its own still at Duckhill. Gad! what a place to live in! Only good sport could make it endurable. Eh? What?" as he became conscious of a voice at his elbow. "Speak louder, can't ye?" inclining an ear that was not so quick as it had once been. "What d'ye say? Who has been here?"

"A young gentleman, sir. Said he would call again in an hour."

"Did he leave no name?"

"No, sir. But the hour is nearly up, sir."

"Can it be Tom?" reflected Thistleblow; and, in spite of himself, he rather wished it were not Tom. "My letter was a pretty stiff one, but hardly enough to have brought a cool youngster like that straight off up here. If Tom were like most firebrands of his age, he might have darted off—but I don't fancy you catch my very prudent and cautious young friend doing anything in such hot haste. He will chew the cud of my communication first. No, no; it can't be Tom. Tom is a real old

‘slow coach.’ He would never dash off at a moment’s notice. I need not be afraid of its being—*Why, Tom, how are you? How are you, my good fellow?*” as the entrance door swung open at the moment. “Didn’t know you were in town. Have you come to breakfast? I’m just sitting down. Come in—eh, had your breakfast? Oh, you young fellows are so deuced early nowadays; in my day we were up all night, and in bed half the day. That was your father’s style, Tom. But you boys of to-day go in for health and longevity. Quite right—quite right. Nothing like early hours and open air for reddening the gills. You look so abominably healthy, you young scamp, you make us all ashamed of ourselves. As if you had just been pulled out of the river! Well, how goes all at Duckhill? Sit down, and we can talk,” having reached an empty table in the dining-room. “You—ah—got my letter, I suppose?”

The change of accent was slight, but perceptible.

“I got yours on Saturday night, General Thistleblow,” said Tom, sitting down, and try-

ing to take as long over the operation as his companion did. "I have been away from home this last week ; but I returned on Saturday."

"Been away from home," in evident surprise ; "why, I—I—oh, then perhaps I need not have written ? Somebody has been telling me a cock-and-bull story, perhaps. I took it up too hastily, perhaps. William, William," to the waiter. "This toast is too hard ; take it away ; and get me some softer. I have said so before. Hard toast is detestable."

The long-suffering William whipped off the rack ; he had long ceased to wonder why he was always being told the toast was too hard. He understood and sympathised.

"I—ah—the fact is, I got uneasy about you and yours, Tom ; you will excuse it from your father's old friend. Of course I take a fatherly interest in the girls, and if anything happened to Ida——" he paused, and waited for rejoinder.

A quiet smile passed over Tom's face.

"Thanks, awfully." Not another word did he say.

“Ida is such a charming girl,” the old general proceeded, feeling more at ease since he had got fairly started on the topic in hand, “such a fine-looking girl, and so full of spirit and all that sort of thing, that she is the very girl to run her head against the rocks if one doesn’t look out. ’Pon my word, she ought to have a woman to take care of her, as Lady Sophia Clarke says. Deuced interfering woman, Lady Sophia,—but she is in the right sometimes. A girl can’t be expected to steer her own craft, and you are all young together down at Duck-hill; so—so——”

“We can’t help being young, General; we’ll grow older presently.”

“Quite so, my dear fellow, quite so; and you have done uncommonly well, young as you are, already. Got your property well in hand, your farms all let; no reductions; no bother—but about this Maurice Stafford, Tom. No one blames you; you were not likely to hear things, living out of the world as you do, you are out of the reach of civilised beings, ha! ha! ha! Stafford is a pleasant scapegrace, I must own. Would win his way anywhere,

and, of course, with such very young people——”

“I think he won it with some of the older ones, too,” observed Tom, drily.

“To be sure he did; not with some, but with all. Myself, and Wortlebury, the Jessops, the Clarkes—we were all taken with him. Naturally Ida——”

“Ida? Who said anything about Ida?” demanded Tom, looking up in well-feigned astonishment. “You say ‘naturally Ida,’ why ‘naturally;’ and what do you infer that Ida did?”

The move was decidedly artful. General Thistleblow was thrown back a full pace.

“My dear fellow, you read my letter?”

“I read your letter, certainly; but that does not help me at all now.”

“Why, my dear Tom, not help you? Why, what should I have written about if it were not to help you? I wrote because from what I heard, you were harbouring this young black-guard—of course in all innocence—at your own quiet place, where he was taking the opportunity of making up to Ida. It was to save Ida I meddled in the affair at all; though I must

say, Tom, as your old friend and late—ahem ! guardian, that I think a little more caution in choosing your own associates would not have been amiss, even if there had been no sister in the question. A very few inquiries would have put you in possession of the truth about Stafford, and you would not then have made a mess of it by asking him to make one of a party at your house, either. Women like Lady Sophia Clarke don't like being obliged to be on intimate terms with disreputable characters, and I am told her ladyship is very cross about it."

"Oh, she is," said Tom; "we know she is."

"You do, by Jove?"

"She wrote to Ida. I have had another letter on the subject also."

"Have you?"

"From Colonel Jessop. And here he comes, in good time," as the door swung back. "How do you do, Colonel Jessop. I daresay you are surprised that you did not hear from me before, but the fact is, I have been away from home, attending the funeral of a relation, and did not get back till Saturday. I thought I

should see you here. I am up on business, and looked in to see General Thistleblow."

"You did not come up on purpose then?" General Thistleblow pronounced aloud the thought which arose in both his mind and Jes-sop's at the moment.

"Oh, dear no," said Tom, with almost a drawl. "It wasn't worth that," he added, with a derisive smile. Had Ida beheld him, she would have been proud of her brother.

"Eh? Oh? I'm glad, of course," muttered Thistleblow. "I was afraid perhaps from your haste——" inquiringly.

"My haste had quite another object," replied Tom, still preserving nonchalance. "I thought I might as well look in as I was here, and considering you had both taken the trouble to write to me. I am sure it was awfully kind and well meant, and all that. It happens to be all rot——" both the elder gentlemen started, and General Thistleblow dropped his toast. "You couldn't know it was rot, of course," continued Tom, with the same air of patronising indifference, "and, of course, if there had been anything it it—anything whatever——" smiling

in each face by turns, "it would have been a great thing to have been warned in time. As it is, I am sorry you had the bother of it. It was my fault for not letting you know all about Stafford."

"But, good heavens! my dear fellow, you knew nothing yourself—you know nothing now——"

"Excuse me, General, I know everything now. I have seen a great deal of Stafford since you left Duckhill. He was with us till last Sunday."

"Hum! Nearly a month," observed Colonel Jessop. Hitherto he had held his tongue.

"Nearly a month—yes," said Tom, cheerfully. "We like him. He paid us a very pleasant visit."

"And your sisters, sir—your sisters?" demanded General Thistleblow, now growing angry. "What about them, sir? They like him too, I suppose? Ida likes him, I suppose; and yet you took me up short just now——"

"You have no right to suppose anything about my sister Ida. I won't have my sister's name enter into this discussion." On a sudden

Tom took the bit between his teeth. "Because I ask a friend to stop with me, and shoot with me, and because I happen to have sisters living at home, are they to be insulted by the presumption that as a natural and inevitable sequence, they—or one of them—is in love with him? That is what I mean about Ida, General Thistleblow. Understand that she has nothing to do with the matter in hand. You accuse Stafford of not being a proper friend for me, or suitor for her. My friend he is. Stick to that fact, and make good your accusation against him. It is worth so little," laughing scornfully, "that I don't advise you to press it too closely. But in the light of a suitor Mr. Stafford has not yet shown himself, so we may dismiss that charge." He folded his arms and lounged back in his chair, and the two old soldiers glanced at each other.

Amazement took away their powers of speech.

"All of this is mighty fine, Tom," said General Thistleblow at last, "and you are quite right to bluster it off, if you can; but I warn you bluff won't pay unless it is backed up by

solid facts in this instance. Your friend Stafford, whom you have been admitting to your family circle in the most intimate manner, is a disreputable scoundrel, a fellow who was kicked out of his regiment, and who has broken his father's heart. He preys upon anybody he comes across, and you being his latest and simplest victim, he has gulled you completely. It may or may not be true that he is after Ida—he may be only flirting with her——”

“I told you to let her name alone. Understand that I mean it.”

“You talk in a very unbecoming manner, very unbecoming, and—and disrespectful; yes, by Jove, disrespectful. You are mortified at being found guilty of a piece of folly, and vent your spleen on me. I tell you, sir, you ought to know better.”

“I am not mortified,” said Tom, boldly. “I have no cause to be mortified, as I shall very soon show. But I am determined not to have my sister's name dragged into this affair, and if you will persist in referring to her, I shall simply take up my hat, and leave you to find out from other sources what a ridiculous

blunder has been made among you. Lady Sophia Clarke may as well learn the truth too."

"Gad! I wish I had let it alone!" muttered Jessop, under his breath.

For after all, neither he nor Thistleblow had a proof to offer, nor a person to fall back upon. They could not even, when confronted by Tom's scornful eyes, be positive as to what each had heard, or from whom they had heard it. Jessop thought it came from one quarter; Thistleblow from another.

Thistleblow grew angry with Jessop at last. "It was I who told you, you slipshod fellow. You did not hear anything; I told you everything."

"So I thought," was written on Tom's face opposite.

"And who told Lady Sophia Clarke?" exclaimed he, suddenly.

The other two looked at each other. "Not I," said Jessop. Then "Not I," echoed Thistleblow, somewhat faintly.

But anon he paused. "I might have mentioned it to Sir Robert," he murmured.

"It comes then to this," said Tom Barnet,

throwing back his head and breathing disdain, "that General Thistleblow hears casually in a public place a Stafford talked of—"

"They said 'Maurice.' I could swear they said 'Maurice.'"

"Maurice, if you like. Anyhow, you hear a Maurice Stafford spoken of as a drinking, gambling, betting scoundrel; you find him at my house neither drinking, gambling, nor betting, but you choose to believe he is the scoundrel."

"I know that he left the service, and I heard it said that he was turned out of it. What is more, I believe the last," maintained Thistleblow defiantly. "A man does not throw up his commission for nothing."

"Have we got to the bottom of the whole? Have I anything more to hear?"

"It is enough as it is, one would think." Jessop recovering, tried a weak sneer.

"Well, then," said Tom, putting his hand in his breast pocket, "as I have got other things to attend to, we may as well cut this short. I am glad I looked in, however. This slander"—looking round with an eye beneath which

those of the other men sank, "is of more consequence than I thought. You, at any rate, General Thistleblow, as you have been at the pains to spread about a false, malicious, damnable report, are bound to contradict it. I say, sir, you are bound to do this. It is a lie from beginning to end. Stafford's brother has been mistaken for him, and Stafford has had to bear the brunt. If you don't believe me, I have two letters here, one from my Cambridge chum, Theobald Mellor, who is old Mr. Stafford's near neighbour, and the other from the colonel of Maurice Stafford's regiment. I had inquired of the colonel into the cause of Stafford's resigning. I am not quite such a booby as to make friends with a man and know absolutely nothing about him, General Thistleblow. I can't show you these letters because they are marked 'Private,' but this is Mr. Mellor's address, and Colonel Wallace is in town. I am going to see him this afternoon, and—and—you can ask him any questions you like about Maurice Stafford, that's all."

"I know Colonel Wallace," said little Jesop, looking rather frightened. "Of course

we take your word, Barnet. 'Pon my word, I'm very sorry, but I do assure you I only wrote out of——"

"Friendship?" said Tom, cocking his eye at him.

"Friendship!" echoed General Thistleblow, scornfully. He was glad to have some one to scorn. "Not he! Dash it all, Jessop, don't stand cringing there. You know as well as I do who it was that set you on. It was to oblige that old harridan, Lady Sophia Clarke, that you——"

"She almost made me do it, she did indeed, Barnet. I did not want to meddle; I have no wish to make myself disagreeable."

"Nor any need to try," growled Thistleblow.

"But Lady Sophia was so concerned about your sister."

"Confound you! My sister! If you repeat my sister's name again——" Tom sprang to his feet. Then he gulped down something in his throat and put his hands on the back of the chair in front of him. "You have got to go with me to Lady Sophia Clarke's now," he said, quietly.

For once in his life Jessop would have given the world not to have gone near the corner house in Chesterfield Gardens, but it was no avail to struggle. "You have got to go, and it is the least you can do," said Tom; "and General Thistleblow, when—ah—will you see Sir Robert?"

General Thistleblow turned slowly round, and looked the young man in the face.

"Within the hour," he said, emphatically, "and Tom Barnet, hark ye, I have more respect for you this day than I ever thought to have in my life. Damme! you have acted like your father's son. You have been rude to me, dashed rude, and I like you for it. We'll be better friends in future. I feel I have made a thundering old fool of myself, and I'm not ashamed to own as much. Give me your hand, my boy, and if I have done my best to take away the character of your friend, you will see that I shall do all I can to put it back again. You go at Lady Sophia with half the pluck you went at me, and she'll wither before you. And good speed to you, my lad—God bless ye! God bless ye!"

“Poor old fellow!” said Tom to himself, and the very next person who had woodcock sent up from Duckhill Manor was General Thistleblow.

CHAPTER XIX.

COLONEL WALLACE'S TESTIMONY.

AFTER all, Colonel Jessop did not have a bad time of it in Chesterfield Gardens. It was something to be in a scrape along with a woman of Lady Sophia Clarke's standing, and it was something yet more to see her ladyship struggling to get out of it. He could never have hoped to behold the colour come and go on a brow usually so imperious; nor to hear confusion in the voice to whose behests all around were wont to bow.

Having had his own share of the whipping, he almost enjoyed seeing his noble accomplice under castigation.

She had been worse than he; he had merely cackled over the humour of a piece of ill-natured gossip, whereas Lady Sophia had taken pleasure in its sting. Well did he recollect how resolute she had been that he should

bear his part in the transaction. She was to write to Ida; he to Tom. Neither of them had consulted General Thistleblow, who, truth to tell, did not know that anyone else had been before him in the field; and although Jessop's sole reason for silence had been his desire to keep dark his growing intimacy with the Clarkes, respecting which Thistleblow was already caustic and jealous, Lady Sophia's reticence was less innocent. She feared lest anything should transpire to mar her triumph; lest Sir Robert or General Thistleblow should either of them qualify the accusation which had served her purpose so well. Men, she averred, would tell you a thing one day, and the next would eat their own words. She had known Sir Robert do as much before. And though Sir Robert was as positive in the present instance as she had ever known him to be about anything, it was as likely as not that he would turn round if spoken to on the subject again, and vow that Thistleblow was a mere wind-bag, as all Liberal-Unionists were.

Accordingly she had taken measures not to

be baulked of her revenge. While she could honestly present Stafford in odious colours she would make haste to do so ; and if anything came out in palliation of his offences afterwards, she would in justice also let it be known. But write she must ; and she had, as we know, seen to it that Jessop should write in the same strain by the same post. Lady Sophia had then straightened her back, and felt that she had done her duty.

Having thought of the task as her "duty," both before and after it was accomplished, at the end of a week the "duty" had come to look so positive and imperative in the retrospect, that it was without the slightest qualm of conscience or tremor of expectation that she beheld her young cousin enter her morning room, even at an hour so early as to betoken something unusual in the visit.

Doubtless he had come to inquire, to beg advice, to express gratitude. Seeing Tom in the company of Colonel Jessop confirmed all three suppositions.

Had she noted Jessop's expression of countenance, indeed, she might there have read how

widely different was the state of the case; but Lady Sophia was not a person to observe any one's expression.

She was thus entirely unprepared for the scene which followed, and which, as we have said, the treacherous Jessop enjoyed. Every now and then he stole a glance at his noble patroness, and every glance refreshed his soul. Lady Sophia's colour mounted higher and higher, and her discomfiture grew more and more unconcealed as the moments passed.

At length, however, she put forth an effort on her own behalf.

“As a near relative I might be supposed to have some interest in the case. You blame me for opening the eyes of our dear Ida, when I did but follow the promptings of my own conscience towards a motherless girl. If Ida had been my child, do you suppose I would have wished her to place her affections on a worthless wretch? My affection for Ida would not permit me to stand by idly.” Her voice was beginning to regain its own hard, unwavering tones,—but for once Lady Sophia had met her match. She had mistaken Tom Barnet when

she thought she could treat him and his with contempt.

“I think, Lady Sophia, the less said about your affection for Ida, or for any one of my sisters, the better,” said Tom, in accents as hard as her own, and having in them moreover a ring of profound derision. “It was not a particularly kind thing to do to a ‘motherless girl’ to tell her slap out that the man you thought she cared for was all that was bad; and if your conscience prompted you to do that, it ought to prompt you now to make the only reparation you can for being so cruel.”

(“So cruel! By Jove!” whispered Jessop, catching his breath.)

“You forget yourself altogether to — to speak to me like this,” fumbled Lady Sophia, all unused to being thus bearded in her own den. “I—I must say I never heard a—a young man forget himself as you are doing.”

“It’s very likely,” replied Tom, calmly. “But whatever I may forget, I know what I have got to remember, and it is this. As you have blackened Maurice Stafford’s reputation

to us, I daresay you have done it to other people. Oh, you have!" (catching an expression which flitted across her face) "I thought it was very likely. Now look here, Lady Sophia, it is a very awkward thing to take away a man's character. You must oblige me by ordering your carriage and going round among your acquaintances this afternoon, and telling them all in every house you go to that you have been under a mistake as regards my friend. I am sure you will," keeping his eye upon her as she made a restive movement, "because it will save me—you understand, Lady Sophia—it will save me from doing it myself."

("Gad! I never saw a woman so caught in her own trap!" inwardly ejaculated Jessop.)

A happy thought, however, occurred to her ladyship. "It is impossible for me to do what you ask, Tom," she observed almost blandly. ("Knuckling under, by Jove!" chuckled Jessop.) "Having heard what I heard from Sir Robert, his lips only can unsay it. If he assures me I have been mistaken, can you doubt my readiness to make the *amende honorable*?"

("He does not doubt your making it, madam, he does not doubt that in the slightest," sneered Jessop, silently. "But if my eyes don't play me false, Master Tom doubts your readiness as much as I do. You're regularly nailed this time, my lady—nailed—that's what you are.")

"When will Sir Robert be in?" demanded Tom, abruptly.

"I really don't know. He usually is out till luncheon."

"Will he be found at his club?"

"Oh, yes—to a certainty."

"General Thistleblow has found him there then," said Tom, "and you will be able to decide on your line of action when he comes in. You will hear from him the truth of what I have told you."

"You will not stay to see him yourself?" murmured Lady Sophia, feebly; "luncheon will be up almost immediately." Not that she wanted him to stay, but she was frightened into a desperate civility.

"I am afraid I cannot stay, Lady Sophia, nor can Colonel Jessop. He has promised to

go with me to meet another gentleman who is also concerned in this affair. I particularly wish Colonel Jessop to hear what Stafford's brother officers think of him, and we are going now to the Naval and Military, where I learned this morning that Colonel Wallace was expected in the course of the day—probably about two o'clock."

Lady Sophia glanced at Jessop. She was longing for him to stay and for Tom to go; dying to pour forth her indignation, her incredulity, and her resentment behind the avenging back of her tormentor; but she did not dare to make the suggestion—nor did Jessop. Tom had cowed them both to their inmost fibres.

"We may as well be going, I think," said the boy, rising. At another time he would have waited for his companion to rise, or for his hostess to give the signal of dismissal. As it was he took the lead; he was the only honest person present, and he scorned the other two.

And they saw he did, and accepted the contempt.

“Come along, Colonel,” said Tom. “Good-bye, Lady Sophia. My kind regards to Sir Robert.” And he marched head in air down the broad staircase, and past the lacqueys who held open the door. But he did not go away with a glow at his heart as he had done from his first interview. He had only crushed Lady Sophia. She had emitted no noble spark beneath the blow.

As for Jessop, he despised Jessop too cordially to expect anything good from such a source, and he only tethered the spiteful little backbiter to his side, in order primarily to drive the last nail into the coffin of the slander, and secondly to deprive Lady Sophia of any support she might have received from the presence and sympathy of her fellow conspirator.

It must be owned that Tom did the thing thoroughly. He was not of a vengeful nature, but many emotions combined to make him unsparing of himself and others on the present occasion.

Ida, his dearly loved sister Ida, had been put to the blush, affronted, insulted, and forced to

behave unwarrantably in her own defence; Stafford had been traduced and maligned; and he himself had been wounded in his tenderest point.

He was conscious of a desire to show of what stuff he was made; and for the benefit of our readers we may add that no one of those with whom he came in contact on that December day ever had the slightest doubt about it afterwards.

The anxious civility, almost subservience of Lady Sophia Clarke, whenever Tom Barnet entered her reception rooms in the future, was a matter of wonder to many; while Jessop would have fetched and carried for him like a dog; and General Thistleblow, very red in the face whenever his late ward's name was mentioned, would puff and blow, and blurt out as fast as tongue could speak: "The finest young fellow in the world, Tom Barnet. The very image of his dear old dad. Bless my soul! I wish we had a few more such young men nowadays."

To return, however, to Piccadilly on the afternoon in question. By good hap not only

Colonel Wallace but several of his subordinate officers were in the hall of the club when Tom Barnet and his companion entered.

“ You know Colonel Wallace ? ” said Tom, still retaining the command which he had assumed from the first. “ If he is here—oh, that is he, is it ? Introduce me, will you ? ”

Jessop meekly did so. He told Thistleblow afterwards that the youngster’s bow was a treat to see.

Colonel Wallace, however, seemed very well pleased to see the treat. As soon as he caught the name, which had to be repeated twice, for he was a little deaf, his countenance lighted up, and he extended a hearty hand.

“ Mr. Barnet ? Oh, yes, of course. A friend of Stafford’s. Delighted to see you. We are just going in to luncheon ; will you join us ? These are some more of Stafford’s brother officers—late brother officers, I should say—more’s the pity ! We miss Maurice. He was as good as an oil can in the regiment ; always in good humour, and never had an ill word for anybody. Eh ? Oh, you must,” as Tom made as though he would have declined the luncheon,

“come along in,” continued the speaker, taking by the arm the only half-reluctant youth. “I should have been so sorry to miss you.” Then in a lower tone, “It’s all right about Stafford, I hope? You found my letter satisfactory? If not, here are these others, you know. Camberwell, and White—both knew him well. You can have a word with them if you desire it.”

“Not in the least,” replied the young man, warmly, but also subduing his tones so as to be inaudible behind. “I require nothing more, unless perhaps”—he hesitated—“unless you could just lead these gentlemen into talking of Stafford in a friendly way before Colonel Jessop.”

“Eh? Was it he?” A nudge and a huge whisper. “Oh, the little beast,” as Tom’s face showed assent. “Oh, we’ll soon settle him,” proceeded his new friend with infinite contempt. “Mixed up the brothers, I s’pose, and wasn’t sorry to do it, eh? Just like him. He always was a—— Now then, gentlemen, where will you sit? Mr. Barnet, sit by me. What a pity that Stafford is not here. He lunched with me three days ago——”

Tom looked up quickly.

"I tried to get him to stop up in town a bit," proceeded the speaker as seriously as though he had been speaking the exact truth. "But he is so devilish run after that he never has a day to himself. He was off somewhere or other—to some big place or other—in the afternoon. Never knew a fellow in such request. He was a dead loss to the regiment, was he not, Camberwell? The most popular man we had, eh, White?"

"All the same, it was a bit of blarney about the big houses," confided the burly colonel aside to his neighbour; "between you and me, Stafford seemed rather at a loose end, and not to know very well what to do with himself. It ended in his going down to his own place; where I gather he was not precisely wanted. He has had a row with his young scamp of a brother, and the father takes the scamp's part, as fathers will. A weak-minded old creature, rather touched in the head, I fancy. If you want Stafford, you will find him in Norfolk. I can give you the address."

"Thank you, sir," said Tom. "I do want him."

“So I shan’t get back to-night,” reflected he. “I made sure Maurice was in town. It is no great matter; those folks at Duckhill won’t stickle about a single day. And I have got to find this chap, and make my apologies, if I can do no more. Of course if I can do more——” Then he paused. “Poor Ida!”—another pause—“Poor girl! How I should like to take him back to her! To appear together, we two, when they are only expecting one! To show her that for all she is so clever, there are some things that need a man! It’s a man’s business I am on now.”

And at this point he found everyone laughing because Colonel Wallace had made a joke, and under cover of the joke the luncheon was over, and all were rising from the table.

An afternoon train conveyed our young traveller down to Norfolk, and his destination was reached in what he felt to be good time for dinner. Heartily, however, did he wish the next half-hour over, and dinner on the table. It was almost as bad as the arrival feeling he had experienced at Pine Ridge.

There was a disconsolate look about the

place too. It was not well kept up ; the lodge gates stood open, not as though many vehicles were in the habit of passing through, but rather as if it were worth no one's while to shut them. There were no cheerful lights twinkling from the windows. The door bell was not responded to for a very long time.

When at length a respectable looking man with a beard, and in the garb of a gamekeeper, unlocked the door, Tom felt sure something was wrong ; nor was he deceived by appearances. The house was shut up ; the gentlemen were away ; Mr. Maurice had run down a few nights before, but had left on the Friday morning. Interrogated, he did not know precisely where Mr. Maurice had gone, but thought Mr. Mellor might know. He had seen the two speaking to each other on the road ; Mr. Mellor lived only a little over two miles away, (suggestively).

What could a poor belated traveller do than take so obvious a hint ? The horse's head was turned in the direction indicated. " And here am I rolling through this Norfolk mud on a beastly cold, dark night, behind a half-blown

brute that goes lame, and may come to a standstill any moment, not knowing where I am going, or what sort of a welcome I may find!" cogitated Tom Barnet, "all because I have got a hot-headed sister who couldn't trust her brother, but took him for a fool, as all the rest did. I think I have shown a good many people I am not a fool during the last few hours; but I have got to show one or two more yet. Is this the place?"

It was the place, and the place and the welcome were all they should have been. He was secure of a night's lodging and every comfort—but in regard to Maurice Stafford, his host could not say with positiveness where Maurice Stafford had gone. Maurice had talked about Southampton; he almost thought he had said he was going to Southampton; but, anyhow, it could be easily found out whether he had done so or not, since the speaker knew the people to whom his friend had gone, provided Southampton at all had been his destination. He would telegraph in the morning.

In the morning he did telegraph, and the reply came back within the hour. "Was

here. But left early this morning for London."

Left for London? That was lucky. Southampton had staggered Tom in spite of himself; but he would have had to go to London at all events before returning to Duckhill. He took a grateful leave, and departed on his new quest. Fortune favoring him, he would catch up with Stafford in time for the night train north.

CHAPTER XX.

CONCLUSION.

A MORE amiable set of people could not have been gathered together than the deserted house-party now at Duckhill, but if it be true that even a worm will turn at last, still more is this the case when one worm meets another and demands, "Has not the time come for turning? When do you begin to turn?"

"It is really more than one ought to stand," quoth Mr. John Lytton at last, when the fifth day came and no Tom re-appeared, nor could any reason, to be called a reason, be given for such extraordinary and neglectful conduct. Uncle Jack was the most placable of human beings, and as for aunt Bess, if Ida had only confided in her, she would have been one vast gush of sympathy and consolation. Unfortunately it was precisely this gush which was dreaded, feared, and resolved against. What-

ever happened, Ida's aunt should never know what Ida was now suffering.

Ida's face grew long and white as the days passed. To her Tom was cheery and sanguine, but he wrote the truth; he was still looking for Maurice Stafford, and, do what he would, he could not find him. Maurice Stafford seemed to have disappeared off the face of the earth. Wherever Tom went he found traces, still warm, of the friend he was pursuing; but as certainly did the traces vanish into thin air directly he thought they were leading him straight to his mark. Had he known what a wildgoose chase it was to be, when first he started, he felt that it would have been better for him to have gone straight home, after exploding his bombshell among the traducers; but he had been led on, step by step, expecting each to be the last, till really he did not like to be baulked in the long run, and accordingly he would stay up one day longer, he wrote on the Friday morning, and if he could not lay hold of Stafford that day, nothing should prevent his leaving town on Saturday morning, and being with his own people by nightfall.

Ida hardly knew how to make this announcement, nor what to think of it herself. It would be dreadful to have her brother come back baffled, and powerless to do more than had been done already ; but each day that detained him on his quest was growing more and more uncomfortable for those left in the lurch by his absence. Her uncles and aunts had almost ceased to make remarks when she had, perforce, to own that no Tom was to be expected each day ; her cousins, Maud and Caroline, who had begun by feigning pique, had only too obviously no further need of pretence in the matter ; the very boys wondered loudly what was up : while Jenny and Louie hardly durst mention their brother's name, and connecting his protracted absence with Ida's wan looks and short answers, were disloyal for the first time in their lives.

“ We have been a fortnight here, during which time my nephew, who asked us down and whose house we are in, has given us his company for two half days,” observed the elder of the two uncles at last. “ My wife and I and our daughters will leave to-morrow morn-

ing, and Ida may make what apologies she chooses to Tom on his return."

"It strikes me that *he* is the person who ought to apologise," bluntly rejoined the other. "If you go, Reginald, we go too. I don't intend my family to be held cheap any more than you do yours. As for this business of Tom's—I stood by him when he said business called him, and it was only for a day—I thought all the better of the lad for dashing off again, vile weather though it was, rather than lose his market for whatever it was he had on hand—but 'business' that he either can't or won't explain, and that even his sister is as mute as a fish about, ought—ought—'pon my word—Tom ought to be ashamed of himself. I don't know what he is up to, but this I do know, we pack, bag and baggage, to-morrow morning."

"And really I cannot ask your uncle to stay," asserted Ida's aunt, when delivering this ultimatum, "for though Christmas is so near, and we might all have been so happy together, Tom's extraordinary conduct—I must call it extraordinary, my dear Ida—has so put your

uncle out, that nothing I could say or do would keep him now. And, indeed, I must own—ahem!—that it is dull, a little dull, in a house where the master is away. We do not seem as if we quite knew what to do with ourselves. One ought not to be invited down, and then absolutely deserted, you know, Ida.”

It was hard upon Ida to witness such manifest mortification, and to know how vexed and ashamed Tom would be—must be, indeed, as it was—and all on her account. But she could not confide in aunt Bess. The more she thought of it the less she felt she could do it. What could she say? Own that under a false impression she had driven Maurice Stafford from the house, and that she was now breaking her heart to get him back again? Own that Tom in his goodness, and kindness, and straightforwardness, was hunting Stafford from place to place, and throwing every other consideration to the winds in his dogged resolve to get hold of him by some means or other? Not she. It made her wince and shrink within herself that even Tom should know how remorseful were her feelings: and a dozen times

a day she was fain to dash off a peremptory command for her brother's return—but anon would rise the hope that every post might bring better news, and again the haunting fear lest, if Stafford were not now found—found at once, and while still smarting from his wounds, they might heal, and he be lost to her for ever.

“He may go off no one knows where; and even if it be not to any far-off place, or for any great length of time, still a few months' absence would make it impossible for Tom to rake up a trifling incident, and apologise for a sister's ignorance of the world. It would seem to be making too much of the affair: seem as if we had all been brooding over it, and magnifying it—oh, it could not be done,” cried she, in bitter musings.

“Tom must find him now—or never; if once Tom comes back to Duckhill without Maurice Stafford, we shall never, never, never see him here again.”

And back to Duckhill Tom had to come without Maurice Stafford.

“It seemed well-nigh incredible, but it was

so. No one could help him, and at last he came to a point where he could no longer help himself.

So far he had conducted his mysterious search on strictly commonplace principles. "Had any one seen Stafford?" He, Tom Barnet, was in town for a few days, and heard that Stafford was up too. Could any one tell him where to find his friend?

At first everybody could tell him—subsequently nobody. It appeared as if Maurice, on returning south, had instantly reappeared in all his special haunts; a dozen men called upon each other to say that each had seen him—and each had. The farmer who was now the recognised tenant of Beech Farm had a great deal to say about the gentleman who had looked in on him on the Monday morning, ten days before, and assured him that something must have gone wrong with his letter—owing doubtless to the postal interruptions consequent on the frost—for that Mr. Barnet was quite ready to accede to his terms, and sign the lease. The gentleman had been very frank and agreeable; and afterwards Mr. Trusty had expressed him-

self as under an obligation to Mr. Maurice Stafford,—but after he had seen the back of Mr. Stafford's blue overcoat descending the house steps, he had set eyes on him no more.

All at once it seemed to Tom that no one had set eyes on Maurice more. He did not think any mischance had happened to Maurice; he was not of an imaginative nor melodramatic nature; but he did feel as Ida felt, that did he once let go his hold on the present opportunity, it was one which he might never in all after time regain.

Years, or even months, afterwards, he could hardly go up to a guest who had probably in the interim succeeded in forgetting a painful episode, with explanations and apologies. These offered at once might have had, and probably would have had, all the effect hoped for; but if tardily tendered, or only tendered at all, supposing accident or chance threw the two together, would not Stafford be justified in supposing that, rude as had been his awakening, Ida had yet meant to awake him from a dream?

Stung to the quick by the thought which

loomed gigantic—as such thoughts are apt to do—in a mind ill at ease, it is not to be wondered at that lesser considerations gave way before it. A fortnight ago and Tom Barnet could not have believed that he should hear of the break up of his second house-party with so little regret; but he was sick at heart, and all the *éclat* of his primal success in town was wiped out by the disastrous failure which followed.

A gloomy reaction set in. “Let them go!” he muttered, when the news came that one and all were on the eve of departure from Duckhill. “Let them go! They are as bad as the first lot. They have no patience—no confidence in a fellow. They might have guessed I was in a hole, and that it was rough upon me, and not have thought only of their own selfish selves. I shall be glad to be alone when I get back. Ida won’t blame me, anyhow—she knows I have done what I can; I have worried here and I have worried there, and bothered with trains and telegrams, and never once been near Margaret! Ida knows about Margaret now, and that is one comfort. Well,” after a pause;

“well, I’ll go home! Home is the best place, after all.”

Going home he had a long nap in the train. He was really wearied out with disappointment and vexation of spirit; and once asleep in a warm, quiet railway carriage, which had only a single other occupant quiescent as himself, he slumbered soundly from point to point.

It grew dark outside.

“We are late,” said Tom, waking up with a long yawn, as the train drew near his station at last. “Five o’clock, by Jove! It is such a clear night I should not have supposed it was so much.”

“A moon, too,” observed his fellow-traveller. “The frost is gone for this winter, I suspect; and a good riddance, too. But these sharp December frosts never last. They say if you skate before Christmas you get precious little skating afterwards.”

“We had only one day,” observed Tom.

“Had you, indeed?”

“Only this day fortnight. Jove! what a long time ago it seems! That hard Saturday, you know.”

"I know. I remember. We all thought that frost was going to hold."

"So did we." ("And that other things were going to 'hold,' too," silently appended poor Tom, looking ruefully out.) "Here we are!" he added a minute afterwards. "This is my station. Thanks," as the other offered to hold his bag while he alighted. "Those are my sticks, too. Thank you. Good night."

He stepped out upon the platform, and looked round. A figure emerged from the gathering darkness, and as it moved towards him he recognised the light tread of his sister Ida. She had come to meet him alone. A pang shot through his heart at the sight.

It was best to say nothing; she would see for herself that he had no good news to tell; and for her own sake he would not assume that she had come in search of any, good or bad. He felt as if silence were the only weapon by which he could crush the last germ of hope in Ida's breast.

"You did not bring any one down with you," he said at last. It was the only thing he could think of to say.

"The girls are spending the day at the vicarage; they are to be brought back before we get home," was the reply.

"Oh. And the others are actually gone? Well, I am glad, on the whole. Their questioning would have been a nuisance. Yes, that's my portmanteau; all right, John," to the porter. "Put it in the carriage. What carriage have you got down, Ida? The dog-cart?"

"Yes, the dog-cart. The roads are quite open now. I took a round before coming here."

"Did you?" said Tom, absently. "The rest left this morning, then? Well, I am glad of it," he repeated. "I don't feel in the mood for them, that's a fact; and I dare swear they don't feel in the mood for me. We shall be best by ourselves, Ida."

"Unless," said Ida, slowly, "unless, perhaps, we—we might have one—just one—good—guest."

"Well, you know, I—of course, I know whom you mean—and Ida, I am most awfully sorry, but—good God!" exclaimed Tom, starting back with almost a shriek as the two

emerged from the station entrance, and fronted the roadside, "Who—who is that? Who have you got there?"

The light was almost gone, but some one was standing at the horse's head whose dim outline was more appalling than if it had been that of a ghost.

"Come and see who I have got," said Ida, laying her hand on her brother's arm, for he had stopped short where he stood. "We have been deserted for the second time, Tom; but once again——"

"Stafford!" cried Tom, bursting from her. "Stafford!"

"We have been playing at hide and seek, Tom," said Stafford, turning round with a smile of broad content. "I don't know what I ought to say to you for all the trouble I have given, but I will say anything you like if you will only let me stay——"

"But, good Heavens!" cried Tom, again. "Ida," turning to her, "was it *this* you meant? Did you know? But of course you knew. What I mean is," trying hard to shape questions and comments, so as to make them accord

with discretion. "What I am trying to say is, when did he come?"

"Three hours ago, Tom."

"And—and——?" He looked from one to the other.

"And I have apologised for my rude behaviour," sparkled Ida, brimming with demure mischief, "and he has forgiven me, though I have had to promise that I will never treat him so again." Then she came close to them both, and murmured softly, "It is all right, dear Tom. Maurice knows everything. And—we—we——"

"If it has got to being 'we,'" cried Tom, with a laugh of pleasure, "I had better take a back seat," putting his bag on the cushions, preparatory to suiting his action to the word. "Dickybird won't stand any longer, Maurice; up you get, Ida; we must talk when we get home. Jove, how you startled me, though!" as he stepped into his seat, and Maurice came round to his, "I can't get over it. I—quiet, now, Dicky—quiet, now—give him his head, Maurice; he's only playing," and away they bounded into the dim country beyond.

It was impossible, however, for curiosity to remain silent many minutes, and accordingly, "Just tell me where he came from, and what he has been doing, Ida?" insinuated Tom, edging himself round. "You tell me, and let Maurice mind his driving."

"He came from only ten miles off, Tom," nodded Ida over her shoulder. "He has been there since Wednesday. He came back to wait in the neighbourhood."

"To wait for what?"

"Till all of them had gone," replied his sister, too happy to be shy. "He did not wish to encounter uncle Jack, and aunt Bess, and——"

"Speak the truth, young lady." All at once dulness itself could have recognised the acknowledged lover in Maurice Stafford's accents. "It was not that 'he did not wish to encounter' all these people, but he had a notion that some one else, who was in command at Duckhill, would not choose that he should. You see, Tom, as soon as I got back to town and put two and two together, I hit on the truth like lightning. It did not require a very Solomon to do

this, for I had not been up three days, before I encountered old Wallace, who began inquiring about you, and all that was going on here. Quiet now, Dickybird, quiet," as the horse shied at a forked branch, ghostly in the moonlight, "and then as soon as ever I went down to my father's, there was Mellor with the same sort of unaccountable interest in my friends at Duckhill," pursued Maurice. "The only mistake I made was in supposing you had instituted inquiries after hearing from your London friends instead of before. But when I saw it all, as I thought, I came straight down to these parts, meaning to look you up at once, for I thought you might have got home; and behold you were away again! I learned that fact at the post-office. That meant Duckhill was still a barred fortress to me, did it not?" bending down towards the figure by his side, with a softening of the tone which her ear alone could catch.

"So then I had to retreat," continued the narrator, "and await the return of its rightful lord, who I knew would give a poor man a fair hearing."

“Aha! I told you that, Ida,” from Tom behind.

“That dear enchantress, Madam Bowdler, your friend and mine, Tom,” pursued Stafford, “wired me this morning that the coast was clear. I did not need to be told twice. By two o’clock I was at Duckhill—how jolly the old place looked!—not a soul was about! I rang the bell like a thief, and Richards looked as if he thought me one! He said he would tell Miss Barnet,—she was in the boudoir,—no one else was at home. Do you think I let him tell, Tom?” And the speaker again stooped to smile into the nearer pair of eyes.

“It was just like to-day—just,” murmured Ida, shining back upon him.

“This day fortnight? That day of horrors?” said Stafford. “So it was—externally. Only then all went wrong; now all is going right.”

“Here we are!” cried Tom joyously, as they dashed up to the door, “and here are the girls looking out for us! Hi! you two, who do you think we have got here?”

And the next moment the air was rent by a perfect scream of joy.

“It’s our own Maurice—our own Maurice back again! Oh, Maurice, they are all gone, and *you* have come back to us!”

“There, you see,” said Tom, looking round with an air of pride and gladness, “that’s what they think about it. And let me tell you, Maurice, in whatever light you may show yourself presently, at Duckhill I believe we shall always think chiefly of you in your character of our *one good guest!*”

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